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FSF58370

Fantasy & Science Fiction

OCTOBER

$2.95 US • CANADA $3.50 • UK £2.50

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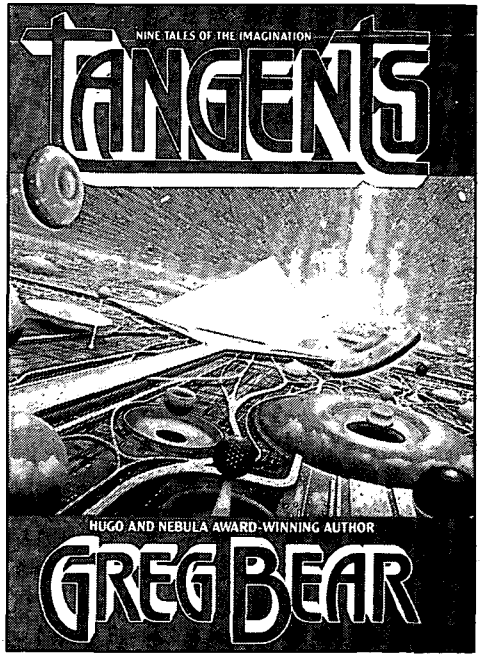

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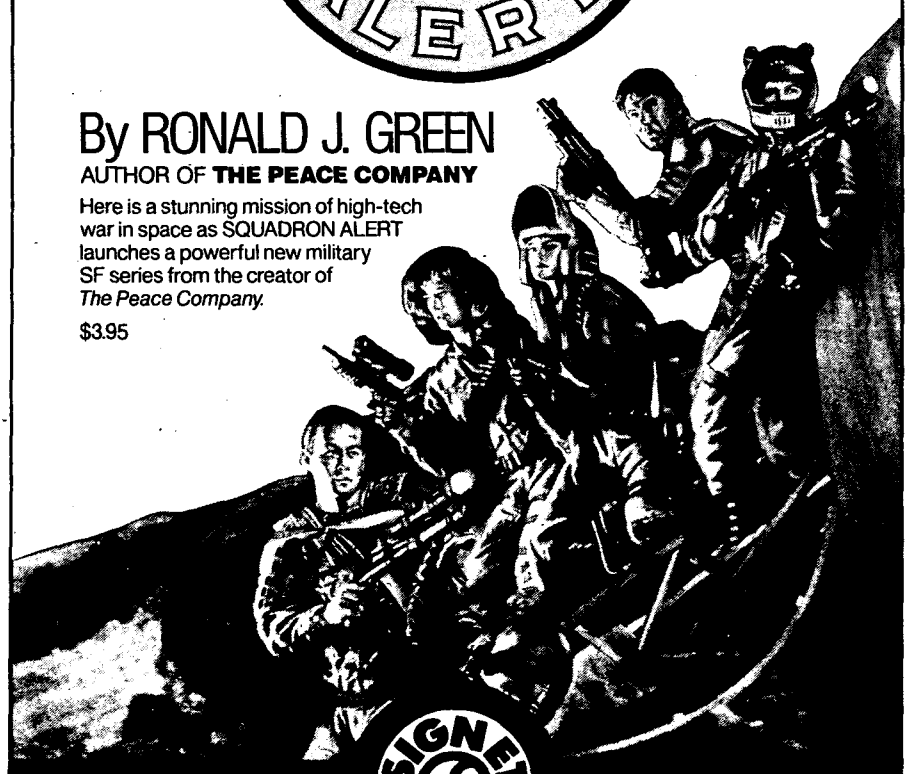
They were armed for a war that they hoped would never start.

STARCRUISER SHENANDOAH

SQUADRON ALERT



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In This Issue

For its first twenty years this magazine was edited and/or published from a number of places: Berkeley California, New York City, Mexico — but for the last twenty it has been run from a Victorian farmhouse in rural northwest Connecticut.

It's not exactly the publishing center of the universe up here, which is perhaps one reason we've remained small; this is the only magazine we publish and the full time staff consists of myself and Audrey Ferman.

Is this a painful admission in this era of bigness — the time of the merger, the takeover, the leveraged buyout — in short the era of the *deal*? We wonder how they find time to put out a product, much less figure out how to make it better, when they're so obssessed with swallowing each other. From this small office, it looks like an off-the-table extrapolation of business from a cyberpunk novel.

All this action has passed us by up here, and we don't think we miss it much. For every mega-publishing company created these days, there are hundreds of small, independent, vigorous magazines like F&SF, though very few, we'd guess, that have been around for 40 years.

This seems to have turned into a paean to smallness, but we have some big stuff we'd like you to consider. For one thing, the issue you hold in your hands is the biggest issue of new fiction we've ever published, almost 100,000 words of fiction and essays for the biggest ever (but still modest) cover price of $2.95.

For another, consider the names on the table of contents page, certainly some of the biggest names in science fiction.

But, you know, we didn't invite these authors to the party just for their "big name" value. We asked them because we knew that these particular writers would respond with the best, highest quality fiction.

Who knows, if we'd been involved with deal making, perhaps we wouldn't have had time to do this very satisfying special 40th anniversary issue. So, for the future, we guess we'll continue to try to think of ways of getting better, rather than bigger.

— Edward L. Ferman

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy&ScienceFiction

OCTOBER • 40th Anniversary Issue

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 77, No. 4, Whole No. 461, Oct. 1989. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.00 per copy. Annual subscription $21.00; $26.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1989 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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Gene Wolfe is probably the most critically acclaimed SF writer of this decade, for such award winning work as The Book of the New Sun series. His most recent novel is THERE ARE DOORS (Tor). Mr. Wolfe's short fiction is of equal high quality, and here is his latest, a spooky and compelling tale of friendship and retribution.

The Friendship Light

By Gene Wolfe

FOR MY OWN part I have my journal; for my late brother-in-law's, his tape. I will refer to myself as "Ty" and to him as "Jack." That, I think, with careful concealment of our location, should prove sufficient. Ours is a mountainous — or at least, a hilly — area, more rural than Jack can have liked. My sister's house (I insist upon calling it that, as does the law) is set back two hundred yards from the country road. My own is yet more obscure, being precisely three miles down the gravel road that leaves the country road to the north, three-quarters of a mile west of poor Tessie's drive. I hope that these distances will be of help to you.

It began three months ago, and it was over — properly over, that is to say — in less than a week.

Though I have a telephone, I seldom answer it. Jack knew this; thus I received a note from him in the mail asking me to come to him on the very day on which his note was delivered. Typically, he failed to so much as mention the matter he wished to discuss with me, but wrote that he

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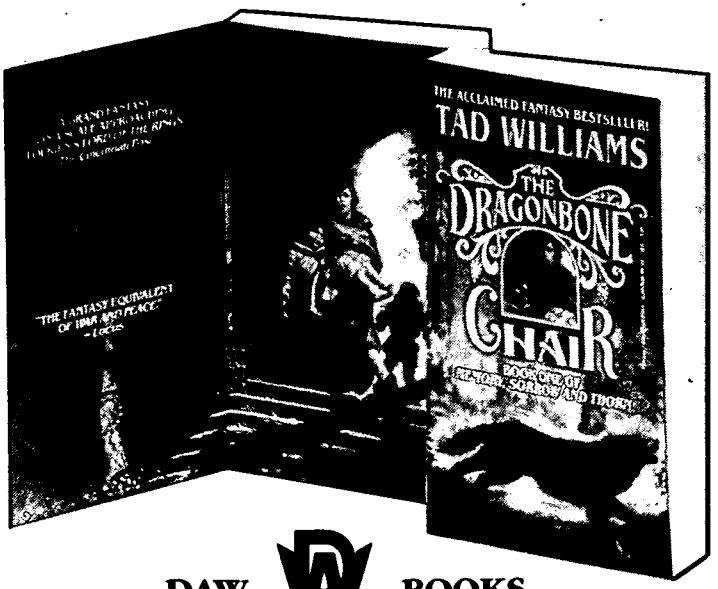
THE DRAGONBONE CHAIR

Book One of Memory, Sorrow and Thorn

Tad Williams



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would be gone for several days. He was to leave that night.

He was a heavy-limbed blond man, large and strong. Tessie says he played football in college, which I can well believe. I know he played baseball professionally for several seasons after graduation, because he never tired of talking about it. For me to specify his team would be counter-productive.

I found him at the end of the drive, eyeing the hole that the men from the gas company had dug; he smiled when he saw me. "I was afraid you weren't coming," he said.

I told him I had received his note only that day.

"I have to go away," he said. "The judge wants to see me." He named the city.

I offered to accompany him.

"No, no. I need you here. To look after the place, and — You see this hole?"

I was very tempted to leave him then and there. To spit, perhaps, and stroll back to my car. Even though he was so much stronger, he would have done nothing. I contented myself with pointing out that it was nearly a yard across, and that we were standing before it. As I ought to have anticipated, it had no effect upon him.

"It's for a friendship light. One of those gas things, you know? Tess ordered it last fall. . . ."

"Before you had her committed," I added helpfully.

"Before she got so sick. Only they wouldn't put it in then because they were busy tuning up furnaces." He paused to wipe the sweat from his forehead with his index finger, flinging the moisture into the hole. I could see he did not like talking to me, and I resolved to stay for as long as I could tolerate him.

"And they don't like doing it in the winter because of the ground's being frozen and hard to dig. Then in the spring it's all mushy."

I said, "But here we are at last. I suppose it will be made to look like a carriage lamp? With a little arm for your name? They're so nice."

He would not look at me. "I would have cancelled the order if I'd remembered it, but some damned woman phoned me about it a couple of days ago, and I don't know — Because Tess ordered it — See that trench there?"

Again, I could hardly have failed to notice it.

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"It's for the pipe that'll tap into the gas line. They'll be back tomorrow to run the pipe and put up the lamp and so on. Somebody's got to be here to sign for it. And somebody ought to see to Tess's cats and everything. I've still got them. You're the only one I could think of."

I said that I was flattered that he had so much confidence in me.

"Besides, I want to visit her while I'm away. It's been a couple of months. I'll let her know that you're looking after things. Maybe that will make her happy."

How little he knew of her!

"And I've got some business of my own to take care of."

It would have given me enormous pleasure to have refused, making some excuse. But to see my old home again — the room in which Tessie and I slept as children — I would have done a great deal more. "I'll need a key," I told him. "Do you know when the workmen will come?"

"About nine-thirty or ten, they said." Jack hesitated. "The cats are outside. I don't let them in the house anymore."

"I am certainly not going to take any responsibility for a property I am not allowed to enter," I told him. "What if there was some emergency? I would have to drive back to my own house to use the telephone. Do you keep your cat food outside, too? What about the can-opener? The milk?"

"All right — all right." Reluctantly, he fished his keys from his pocket. I smiled when I saw that there was a rabbit's foot on the ring. I had nearly forgotten how superstitious he was.

I arrived at the house that for so many years had been my home before nine. Tessie's cats seemed as happy to see me as I was to see them — Marmaduke and Millicent "talked" and rubbed my legs, and Princess actually sprang into my arms. Jack had had them neutered, I believe. It struck me that it would be fairly easy to take one of the females — Princess, let us say — home with me, substituting an unaltered female of similar appearance who would doubtless soon present Jack with an unexpected litter of alley kittens. One seal-point Siamese, I reflected, looks very like another; and most of the kittens — possibly all of them — would be black, blacks being exceedingly common when Siamese are outcrossed.

I would have had to pay for the new female, however — fifty dollars at least. I dropped the idea as a practical possibility as I opened the can of cat food and extended it with one of tuna. But it had set my mental wheels in motion, so to speak.

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It was after eleven when the men from the gas company came, and after two before their supervisor rang the bell. He asked if I was Jack, and to save trouble I told him I was and prepared to sign whatever paper he might thrust under my nose.

"Come out here for a minute, will you?" he said. "I want to show you how it works."

Docilely, I followed him down the long drive.

"This is the control valve." He tapped it with his pencil. "You turn this knob to raise and lower the flame."

I nodded to show I understood.

"Now when you light it, you've got to hold this button in until it gets hot — otherwise, it'll go out, see? That's so if it goes out somehow, it'll turn off."

He applied his cigarette lighter, and the flame came on with a *whoosh*.

"Don't try to turn it off in the daytime. You'll ruin the mantle if you light it a lot. Just let it burn, and it'll last you maybe ten years. Should be hot enough now."

He removed his hand. The blue and yellow flame seemed to die, blazed up, then appeared almost to die once more.

"Flickering a little."

He paused and glanced at his watch. I could see that he did not want to take the time to change the valve. Thinking of Jack's irritation, I said, "It will probably be all right when it gets a bit hotter." It flared again as I spoke.

"Yeah. I better turn it down a little. I got it set kind of high." The sullen flickering persisted, though in somewhat muted fashion.

The supervisor pointed. "Right over here's your cut-off. You see how long that valve-stem is? When the boys get through filling in the trench, it'll be just about level with the ground so you don't hit it with the mower. But if you've got to put in a new light — like, if somebody wracks up this one with his car — that's where you can turn off the gas."

I lingered in the house. If you knew how spartanly I live, in a house that my grandfather had thought scarcely fit for his tenant farmers, you would understand why. Jack had liquor, and plenty of good food. (Trust him for that.) My sister's books still lined her shelves, and there was an excellent stereo. It was with something of a shock that I glanced up from *A Rebours* and realized that night had fallen. Far away, at the very end of

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the long, winding driveway, the new friendship light glared fitfully. It was then that I conceived my little plan.

In the morning I found the handle of the cut-off valve that the supervisor had shown me and took it off, employing one of Jack's screwdrivers. Though I am not really mechanically inclined, I had observed that the screws holding the plate over the control valve had shallow heads and poorly-formed slots; they had given the supervior some difficulty when he replaced them. I told a clerk at our hardware store in the village that I frequently had to retighten a screw in my stove which (although there was never any need to take it out) repeatedly worked loose. The product he recommended is called an anaerobic adhesive, I believe. It was available in four grades: Wicking, Medium (General Purposes), High Strength, and Permanent Installation. I selected the last, though the clerk warned me that I would have to heat the screw thoroughly with a propane torch if I ever wished to remove it.

Back at my sister's, I turned the flame higher, treated the screws with adhesive, and tightened them as much as I could. At that time, I did not know that Jack kept a journal of his own on cassette tapes. He had locked them away from my prying ears before he left, you may be sure; but I found the current number when the end-of-tape alarm sounded following his demise, and it may be time now to give old Jack the floor — time for a bit of fun.

"Well, here we are. Nicolette's in the bedroom switching into something a lot more comfortable as they always say, so I'm going to take a minute to wrap things up.

"The judge said okay to selling the beach property, but all the money's got to go into the fund. I'll knock down the price a little and take a finder's fee. Nicolette and I had a couple of good days, and I thought —"

"Jack! Jack!"

"Okay, here's what happened. Nicolette says she was trying out some of Tess's lipsticks, and looking in the mirror when she saw somebody down at the end of the driveway watching her. I told her she ought to have shut the drapes, but she said she thought way out in the country like this she wouldn't have to. Anyway, she saw this guy, standing there and not moving. Then the gas died down, and when it came back up he was still

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there, only a little nearer the house. Then it died down again, and when it came back up he was gone. She was looking out of the window by that time, she says in her slip. I went down to the end of the drive with a flashlight and looked around, but there's so many footprints from the guys that put up the friendship light you can't tell anything. If you ask me it was Ty. He stopped to look when he saw lights in the windows. It would be just like that sneaky son of a bitch not to come by or say anything, but I've got to admit I'm glad he didn't.

"Well, when I got back to the house, Nicolette told me she heard the back door open and close again while I was gone. I went back there, and it was shut and locked. I remembered how it was while Tess was here, and I thought, that bastard has let those cats in, so I went, 'Kitty-kitty-kitty,' and sure as hell the big tom came out of the pantry to see if there was anything to eat. I got him by the neck and chucked him out."

"Got some good pix of Nicolette and me by using the bulb with the motor drive. What I did was put the bulb under the mattress. Every once in a while it would get shoved down hard enough to trip the shutter, then the motor would advance the film. Shot up a whole roll of twenty-four that way last night. She laughed and said, 'Put in a big roll tomorrow,' but I don't think so. I'm going to try to get her to go back Thursday — got to think about that. Can't take *this* roll to Berry's in town, that's for sure. I'll wait till I go sign the transfer of title, then turn it in to one of the big camera stores. Maybe they'll mail the prints to me, too.

"She wanted me to call Ty and ask if anything funny went on while we were away. I said okay, thinking he wouldn't answer, but he did. He said there was nothing funny while I was gone, but last night he was driving past, and he saw what looked like lightning at an upstairs window. I said I'd been fooling around with my camera equipment and set off the flash a couple of times to test it out. I said I was calling to thank him and see when I could drop by and get my key back. He said he'd already put it in the mail.

"If you ask me he knows Nicolette's here. That was him out there last night as sure as hell. He's been watching the house, and a few minutes ago on the phone he was playing a little game. Okay by me. I've loaded the Savage and stuck it under the bed. Next time he comes snooping around, he's going to have bullets buzzing around his ears. If he gets hit — Hell,

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no jury around here's going to blame a man for shooting at trespassers on his property at night.

"Either there's more cats now, or the coons are eating the cat food again."

"Nicolette got real scared tonight as soon as it got dark. I kept saying what's the matter? And she kept saying she didn't know, but there was something out there, moving around. I got the Savage, thinking it would make her feel better. Every so often the phone would ring and keep on ringing, but there'd be nobody on the line when I picked it up. I mixed us a couple of stiff drinks, but it was like she'd never touched hers — when she finished, she was just as scared as ever.

"Finally I got smart and told her, 'Listen, honey, if this old place bothers you so much, why don't I just drive you to the airport tonight and put you on a plane home?' She jumped on it. 'Would you? Oh, Lord, Jack, I love you! Just a minute and I'll run up and get packed.'

"Until then there hadn't really been anything to be scared of that I could see, but then something really spooky happened. The phone rang again. I picked it up out of habit, and instead of nobody being there like before, I heard a car start up — over the God damned phone! I was mad as hell and banged it down, and right then Nicolette screamed.

"I grabbed the rifle and ran upstairs, only she was crying too much to say what it was. The damn drapes were still open, and I figured she'd seen Ty out by the friendship light again, so I closed them. Later she said it wasn't the guy she'd seen before, but something big with wings. It could have been a big owl, or maybe just her imagination and too much liquor. Anyway we wasted a lot of time before she got straightened out enough to pack.

"Then I heard something moving around downstairs. While I was going down the stairs, I heard it run — I guess to hide, and the sack of garbage falling over. After I saw the mess in the kitchen, I thought sure it was one of those damned cats, and I still do, but it seemed like it made too much noise running to be a cat — more like a dog, maybe.

"Nicolette didn't want to go out to the garage with me, so I said I'd bring the car around and pick her up out front. The car and jeep looked okay when I raised the door and switched on the light, but as soon as I opened the car door I knew something was wrong, because the dome light

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didn't come on. I tossed the rifle in back, meaning to take a look under the hood, and there was the God-damnedest noise you ever heard in your life. It's a hell of a good thing I wasn't still holding the gun.

"It was a cat, and not one of ours. I guess he was asleep on the back seat and I hit him with the Savage when I tossed it inside.

"He came out of there like a buzz-saw and it feels like he peeled off half my face. I yelled — that scared the shit out of Nicolette in the house —and grabbed the hammer off my bench. I was going to kill that son of a bitch if I could find him. The moon was up, and I saw him scooting past the pond. I chucked the hammer at him but missed him a mile. He'd been yowling like crazy, but all of a sudden he shut up, and I went back into the house to get a bandage for my face.

"I was a mess, too. That bastard took a lot of skin off my cheek, and a lot of blood had run onto my shirt and jacket.

"Nicolette was helping me when we heard something fall on the roof. She yelled, 'Where's your gun?' and I told her it was still out in the god-damned car, which it was. She wanted me to go out and get it, and I wanted to find out what had hit on the roof, but I went out first and got the Savage. Everything was O.K., too — the garage light was still on, and the gun was lying on the seat of the car. But when I tried to start the car, it wouldn't turn over. Finally I checked the headlights, and sure enough the switch was pulled out. I must have left the lights on last night. The battery's as dead as a doornail.

"I was pulling out the folding steps to the attic when the phone rang. Nicolette got it, and she said all she could hear was a car starting up, the same as I'd heard.

"I went up into the attic with a flashlight, and opened the window and went out onto the roof. It took a lot of looking to find what had hit. I should have just chucked it out into the yard, but like a jerk I picked it up by the ear and carried it downstairs and scared Nicolette half to death. It's the head of a big tomcat, if you ask me, or maybe a wildcat. Not one of ours, a black one.

"O.K., when I was outside and that cat got quiet all of a sudden, I felt a breeze — only cold like somebody had opened the door of a big freezer. There wasn't a noise, but then owls can fly without making a sound. So it's pretty clear what happened.

"We've got a big owl around here. That was probably what Nicolette

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saw out the window, and it was sure as hell what got the cat. The cat must have come around to eat our cat food, and got into the garage sometime when I opened the door. None of this has got anything to do with the phone. That's just kids.

"Nicolette wanted me to take her to the airport in the jeep right away, but after all that had happened I didn't feel like doing it, so I told her it would be too late to catch a flight and the jeep wasn't running anyhow. I told her tomorrow we'll call the garage and get somebody to come out and give us a jump.

"We yelled about that for a while until I gave her some of Tess's sleeping pills. She took two or three. Now she's out like a light. I've pulled the jack on every goddamned phone in the house. I took a couple of aspirins, but my cheek still hurt so bad I couldn't sleep, so I got up and fixed a drink and tried to talk all this out. Now I'm going back to bed.

THIS IS bad — I've called the sheriff, and the ambulance is supposed to come out. It will be all over the damned paper, and the judge will see it as sure as hell, but what else could I do? Just now I mopped up the blood with a couple of dirty shirts. I threw them out back, and as soon as I shut the door I could hear them out there. I should've opened the door and shot. I don't know why I didn't, except Nicolette was making that noise that drives me crazy. I damn near hit her with the rifle. I've done everything I can. She needs an ambulance — a hospital.

"Now, honey, I want to say — right into here — that it wasn't me, understand?

"Water. . . ."

"I'll get you plenty of water. You say it, and I'll get it right away. Tell them what happened."

"The tape ran out. Had to turn it over.

"O.K., then I'll say it. It wasn't me — wasn't Jack. Maybe I ought to start right at the beginning.

"Nicolette shot at a coon. I was sound asleep, but I must have jumped damned near through the ceiling. I came up yelling and fighting, and it was dark as hell. I hit the light switch, but the lights wouldn't come on.

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The only light in the whole place was the little crack between the drapes. I pulled them open. It was just the damned friendship light way down at the end of the drive, but that was better than nothing.

"I saw she had the gun, so I grabbed it. She'd been trying to work it, but she hadn't pulled the lever down far enough to chamber a fresh round. If she had, she'd probably have killed us both.

"I said, 'Listen, the power's just gone off — that happens a lot out here.' She said she got up to go to the bathroom, and she saw eyes, green eyes shining. She turned on the hall light, but it was gone. She tried to wake me up but I just grabbed her, so she got the gun. Pretty soon all the lights went out. She thought she heard it coming and fired.

"I got my flashlight and looked around. The bullet went right through the wall of Tess's room and hit the bed — I think it stopped in the mattress somewhere.

"Nicolette kept saying, 'Give me the keys — I'll go to the airport by myself.' I smacked her good and hard a few times to make her shut up, once with the flashlight.

"Then I saw the green eyes, too, but as soon as I got the light on it, I knew what it was — just a coon, not even a real big one.

"I didn't want to shoot again, because even if I'd hit it would have made a hell of a mess, so I told Nicolette to open the door. She did, and that's when I saw them, two or three of them, flying around down by the friendship light. Jesus!"

"They're outside now. I know they are. I took a shot at one through the big window, but I don't think I hit it.

"Where the hell's the sheriff's guy? He should've been here an hour ago — the ambulance, too. It's starting to get light outside."

"The coon got in through the goddamned cat door. I ought to have guessed. When Ty was here he had the cats in the house with him, so he unbolted it — that was how Marmaduke got in last night.

"I tried to switch this thing off, but I'm shaking too bad. I damn near dropped it. I might as well get on with it anyway. This isn't getting us anywhere. I gave her the keys and I told her, 'O.K., you want to go to the goddamn airport so bad, here. Leave the keys and the ticket in the dash compartment and I'll go out and pick it up when I can.'

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"I didn't think she'd do it, but she took the keys and ran outside. I went to the window. I heard the jeep start up, and it sounded like she was tearing out the whole damn transmission. Pretty soon she came roaring down the driveway. I guess she had it in second and the pedal all the way to the floor. I didn't think any were close to her, and all of a sudden there was one right above her, dropping down. The wings made it look like the jeep was blinking on and off, too.

"The jeep went across the road and into the ditch. I never thought I'd see her again, but it dropped her on the front lawn. I shouldn't have gone out to get her. I could've been killed.

"It was looking for something in her, that's what I think. I didn't know there was so much blood when you cut a person open like that. What the hell do the doctors do?

"I think she'd dead now."

"The sheriff's men just left. They say the power's off all over. It looks like a plane hit the wires, they said, without crashing. Jesus.

"Here's what I told them. Nicolette and I had a fight. I keep the gun loaded in case of prowlers, and she took a couple of shots at me. They said, 'How do we know you didn't shoot at her?' I said, 'You think I'd miss a woman twice, with my deer rifle, inside the house?' I could see they bought it.

"I said I gave her the keys to the jeep and said to leave it at the airport — the truth in other words. They said, 'Didn't you give her any money?' I told them, 'Not then, but I'd given her some before, back when we were still in the hotel.' I told them she floorboarded it down the drive and couldn't make the turn. I saw her hit and went out and got her, and brought her back into the house.

"They said, 'You ripped her up the belly with a knife.' I said, 'No way. Sure, I slapped her a couple times for shooting at me, but I never knifed her.' I showed them my hunting knife, and they checked out all the kitchen knives. They said, 'How'd she get ripped up the middle like that?' and I said, 'How the hell should I know? She got thrown out of the jeep.'

"I'm not supposed to leave the country, not supposed to stay anyplace but here. They took the Savage, but I've still got my shotgun and the twenty-two."

* * *

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"Power's back on. The tow truck came out for the jeep and gave me a jump for the Cadillac.

"The way I see it, they've never even tried to get into the house, so if I stay in here I ought to be all right. I'm going to wait until after dark, then see if I can get Ty to come over. If he gets in okay, fine — I'll string him along for a while. If he doesn't, I'll leave tomorrow and the sheriff can go to hell. I'll let his office know where I am, and tell them I'll come in for questioning any time they want to see me."

"I just phoned Ty. I said I'd like to give him something for looking after the place while I was gone. And that I was going away again, this time for a while, and I wanted him to take care of things like he did before. I told him I've been using the spare key, but the one he mailed was probably in the box, down by the friendship light, because I haven't picked up my mail yet. I said for him to check the box before he came to the house. He said O.K., he'd be right over. It seems to be taking him. . . ."

Ty again, At this point in the tape, my knock can be heard quite distinctly, followed by Jack's footfalls as he went to the door; it would seem that he was too rattled to turn off his tape recorder. (Liquor, as I have observed several times, does not in fact prevent nervousness, merely allowing it to accumulate.) I would be very happy to transcribe his scream here, if only I knew how to express it by means of the twenty-six letters of the Roman alphabet.

You took him, as you promised, whole and entire. I have no grounds for complaint upon that score, or indeed upon any. And I feel certain he met his well-deserved death firmly convinced that he was in the grip of demons, or some such thing, which I find enormously satisfying.

Why, then, do I write? Permit me to be frank now: I am in need of your assistance. I will not pretend that I deserve it (you would quite correctly care nothing for that), or that it is owed me; I carried out my part of the agreement we made at the friendship light, and you carried out yours. But I find myself in difficulties.

Poor Tessie will probably never be discharged. Even the most progressive of our hospitals are now loath to grant release in cases of her type — there were so many unfortunate incidents earlier, and although society

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really has very little invested in children aged two to four, it overvalues them absurdly.

As her husband, Jack was charged with administration of the estate in which (though it was by right mine) I shared only to a minuscule degree through the perversity of my mother. Were Jack legally dead, I, as Tessie's brother, would almost certainly be appointed administrator — so my attorney assures me. But as long as Jack is considered by law a fugitive, a suspect in the suspicious death of Nicolette Corso, the entire matter is in abeyance.

True, I have access to the house; but I have been unable to persuade the conservator that I am the obvious person to look after the property. Nor can I vote the stock, complete the sale of the beach acreage, or do any other of many such useful and possibly remunerative things.

Thus I appeal to you. (And to any privileged human being who may read this. Please forward my message to the appropriate recipients.) I urgently require proof of Jack's demise. The nature of that proof I shall leave entirely at your discretion. I venture to point out, however, that identifications based on dental records are in most cases accepted by our courts without question. If Jack's skull, for example, were discovered some fifty or more miles from here, there should be little difficulty.

In return, I stand ready to do whatever may be of value to you. Let us discuss this matter, openly and in good faith. I will arrange for this account to be reproduced in a variety of media.

It was I, of course, as even old Jack surmised, whom Jack's whore saw the first time near the friendship light. To a human being its morose dance appeared quite threatening, a point I had grasped from the beginning.

It was I also who pulled out Jack's headlight switch and put the black tom — I obtained it from the Humane Society — in his car. And it was I who telephoned; at first I did it merely to annoy him — a symbolic revenge on all those (himself included) who have employed that means to render my existence miserable. Later I permitted him to hear my vehicle start, knowing as I did that his would not. Childish, all of them, to be sure; and yet I dare hope they were of some service to you.

Before I replaced the handle of the valve and extinguished Tessie's friendship light, I contrived that my Coleman lantern should be made to flicker at the signal frequency. Each evening I hoist it high into the branches of the large maple tree in front of my home. Consider it, please, a becaon of welcome. I am most anxious to speak with you again.

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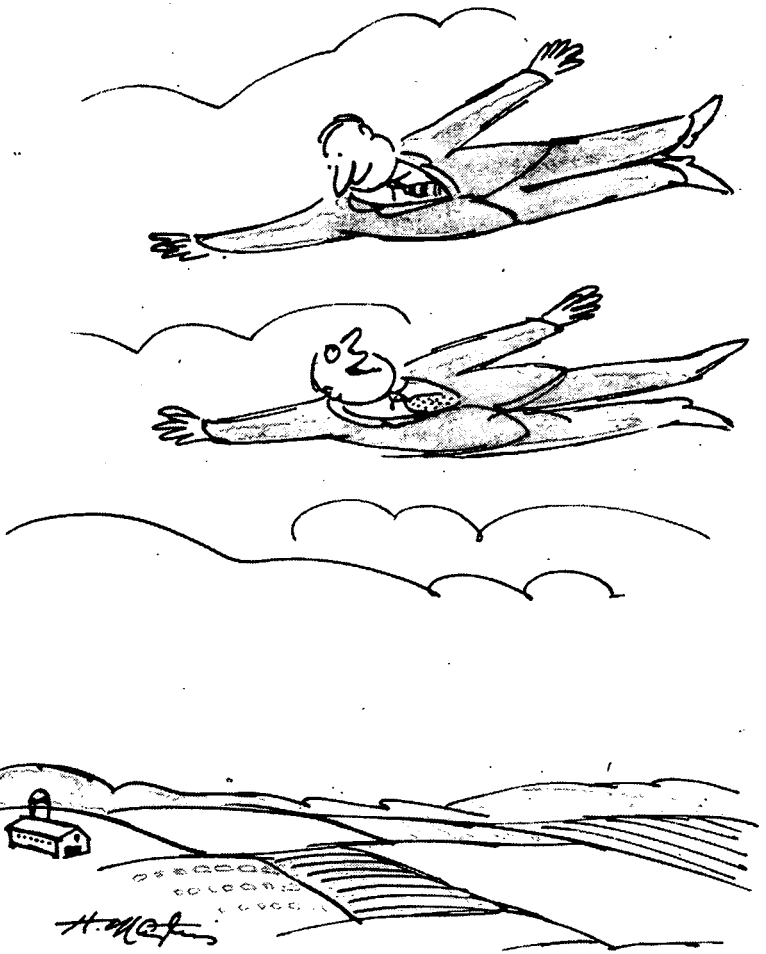

"I wish Orville and Wilbur had lived to see this day."

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

The Best of the Nebulas, Ben Bova, ed. (TOR, cloth, 593 pp, $19.95)

YOU'RE TEACHING a course in science fiction. You want your students to read a lot of terrific stories that are representative of every significant tradition within the field. But you don't want your students to have to spend a hundred bucks on textbooks. What do you have them buy?

For years, the answer has been *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, the anthology that was created by polling members of the Science Fiction Writers of America (SFWA) to find out their favorite stories published before the Nebula Awards were instituted in 1965.

Many years have passed, but *The SF Hall of Fame* is not really out of date — the sf traditions represented within it are still alive and well today. However, there are new voices and new traditions that have emerged in the decades since 1965 — *The SF Hall of Fame* isn't out of date, but it also isn't *complete*.

How do you create an anthology of stories *since* 1965 that has equal validity with the *Hall of Fame*? Obviously, you poll the writers again. This time, though, you have all those Nebula Awards that have been given out from 1965 to 1986. Sixty-three short-fiction awards, to be exact. Far too many for a single anthology.

So Ben Bova, with the consent of SFWA, polled the members again. The results of the poll — along with some interesting analyses of the data — are published in *The Best of the Nebulas*. Some great stories from the period are missing — that can't be helped — but you can't go wrong with a list that includes award-winning stories by Zelazny, Ellison, Delany, Silverberg, Moorcock, Russ, Leiber, McCaffrey, Tiptree, Le Guin, Sturgeon, McIntyre, Varley, Simak, and Martin.

A note in passing: Some of us thought SFWA should never have authorized this book. Giving out a "best of the Nebulas" implies that the unincluded works are the worst of the Nebulas. It's a slap in the face, almost as bad as taking back half the Nebulas ever given. I felt — and feel — that the SFWA officers had no business undercutting the awards given out in the past.

Foolish and hurtful as it might be, however, they *did* authorize this book — and, given that it exists at all, editor Ben Bova has done an excellent job. The book is worth buying; it's worth giving to your students, or to friends who want an introduction to the best science fiction has to offer.

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At the same time, I hope you'll remember that just as good an anthology could have been put together out of the *other* Nebula winners, with stories by such brilliant and well-known writers as Aldiss, Vance, Dickson, Wilhelm, Anderson, Clarke, Wolfe, Benford, Reamy, Asimov, Bryant, Longyear, Bishop, Kessel, Willis, Bear, Dozois, Butler, Kress, and Shepard — as well as a few stories by more obscure but no less interesting writers. The list of the "best" and the "worst" of the Nebulas, combined, are a pretty fair testament to the good judgment of SFWA members over the years. Awards may miss some of the best stories — but they miss damn few of the best writers.

The Nemesis From Terra, Leigh Brackett / *Battle for the Stars*, Edmond Hamilton (TOR Double Novel #8, paper, $2.95)
Enemy Mine, Barry B. Longyear / *Another Orphan*, John Kessel (TOR Double Novel #6, paper, $2.95)

A few things about the TOR Double Novel series.

First thing is: It's really fun to flip a book over and find a whole new front cover upside down on the other side. The compulsion to open the book up and find the place in the middle where the type turns over is irresistible.

Second thing: Some of the best science fiction ever written is novella length. But those great novellas are hard to keep in print. Most of the time they're too long to put into anthologies, and yet they're too short to fill a book. Paired up like this, though, they make a respectable-sized paperback.

Third: TOR is doing a good job of pairing up these stories. Husband-and-wife team Hamilton and Brackett is obvious enough, but heck, it gives us a chance to sample the work of two of the best of the old-timers. And linking John Kessel's and Barry Longyear's Nebula-winning novellas is inspired. A powerful melodrama on the one side, a nasty dream comedy on the other. And when you look at their careers, it's hard to imagine two more opposite writers within the field of science fiction.*

Conclusion: This series is worth owning for its own sake. It's also an ideal way to introduce new readers to sf — stories long enough to make an impact, and yet short enough not to be intimidating. A series so

**Come to think of it, it's not* that *hard to find pairs that are more opposite. For instance, Robert Adams and Joanna Russ, Ursula K. LeGuin and Jerry Pournelle. David Drake and Michael Bishop. Gene Wolfe and Spider Robinson. Compared to these, Longyear and Kessel are practically twins.*

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good that I'm trying to wheedle my way onto the list myself. I've got this novella, see, and I want to put it into the same book with Lloyd Biggle's "Tunesmith," the story that got me into science fiction as a kid. Wish me luck.

The World Treasury of Science Fiction, David G. Hartwell (Little, Brown, cloth, 1083 pp, $22.95)

How do you create a "world" anthology of an overwhelmingly American/English genre, spanning sixty years and a dozen nationalities? And then how do you shape such an anthology so that it will be palatable to an audience of non-science fiction readers?

On the one hand, only David Hartwell is insane enough to think that such an anthology could possibly have anything to do with what science fiction actually is or should be. On the other hand, if anybody on the planet has the knowledge and understanding of the field to put together such an anthology, it's David Hartwell.

The wrong-headedness of the project shows up in Hartwell's propensity to choose some of the flattest, least dangerous or demanding stories by certain writers: John Varley's relatively tame "The Phantom of Kansas," for instance; Bradbury's vanilla "Zero Hour"; and, most puzzling of all, Heinlein's sentimental "The Green Hills of Earth" instead of "All You Zombies" or any of the other stories that blew the field open when they first appeared.

Even more galling is his inclusion of John Updike, an author who has not only contributed less than nothing to the science fiction tradition, but also is the epitome of the language-first school of writing that squats like a fat sterile hen on the empty nest of contemporary American letters, squawking often but producing nothing that is capable of *life*.

However, if you kind of squint as you skim past the familiar names in the table of contents, you'll find some real prizes here: the stories by authors you've never heard of, with foreign-sounding names. Though many of them suffer the woes of translation, with cultural and linguistic stumblingblocks galore, they are vastly rewarding. While these foreign-language authors have had little significant influence on science fiction as it *is*, they reveal many possibilities in the genre that we American and English writers have so far not found on our own, in part because we are creatures of Anglo-American culture, and in part because our very closeness to science fiction as it has been often blinds us to science fiction as it could be.

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Here is something completely different from one of science fiction's long-time quality performers. Fred Pohl's most recent novel is HOMEGOING (Ballantine/Del Rey). He writes: "My principal current activities are writing, travel with my wife (45 states and 25 foreign countries so far) and watching my grandkids grow (six to date, and still counting)."

THE ROCKY PYTHON CHRISTMAS VIDEO SHOW

By Frederik Pohl

ON THE SCREEN OF THE television set, the blank gray brightens to robin's-egg-blue. We see the spires of a fairy-tale castle, with fluffy little clouds behind them. They are growing as we zoom in. The scene looks very much like the opening of a Disneyland special, and to make it even more so, a zitzy stream of glittering comet dust darts in from the RIGHT. It turns into a Peter Pan figure who looks a lot like Jane Fonda. She hovers like a hummingbird, waving a wand at us. We zoom in for a close-up.

JANE

Hello. I'm not Peter Pan. I grew up. It was the world that didn't.

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(Now that we get a better look at Jane, she isn't nearly as much like Peter Pan as she is like Barbarella. She's wearing a Buck Rogers kind of space suit that leaves her head and face free.)

JANE

I'm what you'd call a forensic anthropologist now.

(She zips away rapidly REAR and comes back escorting the skyline, which, as it approaches, changes from fairy tale to Everytown. The castles are actually church spires — Methodist, Baptist, Congregationalist, R.C. Jane reaches down with her wand and touches one of the spires, and the zitzy fairy dust becomes snow. We are looking at a New England town in winter. It could well be Thornton Wilder's Our Town.)

JANE

What I'm trying to do is show whose fault it was. I mean, I already know whose. It was yours, all of yours. You fuckers. But I want to nail it down so there's no argument.

(Sound of caroling comes up: "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen." The camera comes down and looks through open church doors on the congregation. Jane comes to rest on the steps of the church, looking inside for a moment before she turns back to us.)

JANE

Take Christmas. I mean, take Christmas — *please.* Listen to this guy.

(The caroling has stopped, and the minister, who looks like Robert Morley, is offering a prayer.)

MINISTER

And at this time of rejoicing, Lord, we ask of Thee a special care for our

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sons and brothers who now battle in Thy service in far-off lands. Save them from harm. Let their valiant sacrifice be rewarded with the destruction of those who set themselves against Thee and our sacred cause, we beseech Thee in Thy holy name.

(Jane shakes her head.)

JANE

How do you like that guy? Oh, you know, some ways Christmas must have been a lot of fun in the old days, right? Giving presents and all? Celebrating the passing of the winter solstice and the lengthening of the days? Remembering the birthday of this Prince of Peace fellow, and everybody saying they were going to love everybody? I mean, love everybody except those *other* guys.

(The congregation rises and begins to come out into the winter day. Two boys start a snowball fight. Their mothers, flustered but laughing, call to them to stop it, but the boys go on.)

JANE

So why'd you always have to go and screw it up? I mean, do you think we *like* having to wear these goddamned suits?

(One of the snowballs catches Jane behind the ear and knocks her sprawling. She looks up, resigned.)

JANE

It could've been worse. It could've been a hand grenade. You know, a lot of the time it was. Why, I remember a time, a war or two ago—

(She stops to think, rubbing her ear. Then she shakes her head, wincing.)

* * *

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JANE

No, that one wasn't a hand grenade. It was a soldier, and he got me with the butt of his gun. Tell you about it another time, but first I want you to meet some friends of mine.

(She pushes away the backdrop that is the New England town scene, which has frozen into inaction, and reveals that the set of a TV game show is already in place behind it. On this set we see eight young men, all in uniform, though the uniforms aren't the same. Jane strips out of her space suit and is revealed in the tails and tights of a girl tap dancer. She puts on a top hat; her wand has become a circus ringmaster's whip. Music up; she flourishes the whip and speaks.)

JANE

Welcome to our version of "The Dating Game"!

(She points to the man in the first position. He is wearing the uniform of a British soldier of the 1914 war; his head is bandaged, and his helmet is perched on top of the bandage.)

JANE

Bachelor Number One, will you tell us why you're here?

BACHELOR NUMBER ONE

I ain't no bachelor, miss. Got a wife an' two kiddies back 'ome, least I fink I do, if the zeppelins 'aven't got 'em yet.

JANE

That isn't what I asked you, is it?

* * *

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BACHELOR NUMBER ONE

Oh, you mean, *why*, like. Why I'm *here*, you mean. I s'pose it's the syme as all these other blokes, I expect. Coz we're dead?

JANE

Because you had that real big *date*, right? That's the "All-New, Everybody-Plays Dating Game," you see? And now, all you studs, please tell us where you met your date.

(She gestures to them, and one by one they respond.)

BACHELOR NUMBER ONE

Wipers it was, miss.

BACHELOR NUMBER TWO

(He wears a GI uniform from World War II. He is missing an arm.)

They told us we were supposed to take this mountain. I think they said it was named Monte Cassino.

BACHELOR NUMBER THREE

(He wears a Union infantry uniform from the Civil War. He is black and resembles Eddie Murphy.)

Near Petersburg, ma'am. Dey blowed up de mine, an' we went in, an' den dey started shootin' down at us.

BACHELOR NUMBER FOUR

(He wears a Red Army uniform, though it is in rags. He is skeletally thin.)

* * *

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Lake Ladoga, the siege of Leningrad. I fell through the ice and froze.

BACHELOR NUMBER FIVE

(He is Oriental, small, wearing what looks like black pajamas. They are completely burned away on one side, and his flesh is blistered.)

I was carrying rocket grenades down the Trail when the napalm came.

BACHELOR NUMBER SIX

(He wears the fur-collared flying suit of a U.S. Navy pilot, vintage of 1954. He is also badly burned.)

I was shot down north of the Yalu. I landed all right, but the plane was burning, and when I tried to get out, they shot at me.

BACHELOR NUMBER SEVEN

(He wears the uniform of one of Napoleon's hussars, He is seated with Bachelor Number Eight at a common desk.)

I, too, froze in Russia. It was on the way back from Moscow, very cold, and we had no food.

BACHELOR NUMBER EIGHT

(In Wehrmacht uniform. He is blind.)

And I also froze, kind lady. It was more than 130 years later, but it was in almost the same spot as the Frenchy.

JANE

Thanks, guys.

* * *

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(To the audience.)

We could've had lots more — hey, we could've had *millions*, all the way from Thermopylae to Grenada, only you know what it is when you have to stay under budget. And, listen, not just *soldiers*. Women, children, old people — remember Hiroshima? Or the time they wiped out the Catharists in France? "Kill them all," the Catholic general told his troops. "God will know which are His own." And I'm not even talking about, like, say, the *Mongols*, or that all-time goldie oldie, the Second Punic War.

(She scratches her crotch reminiscently.)

Then there are all the other little things that went along with the war for the civilians. You know what I mean?

You have to use your imagination a little bit here, folks — remember I told you about the budget? So we couldn't bring you all the starved children and all like that, and I have to play all the civilian women myself. So there was this soldier, he came into the cellar where I was hiding, and there I was. He got me right behind the ear with the butt of his rifle, and he was already opening his pants. . . .

(Jane turns away and walks toward the wings, lost in thought.)

BACHELOR NUMBER EIGHT

(Indignantly.)

That must have been an Ivan. We German soldiers do not rape.

BACHELOR NUMBER FOUR

No, you just bayonet babies.

BACHELOR NUMBER EIGHT

A damnable lie! I personally bayonetted no babies. The youngest I killed

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had no less than fifteen years, absolutely, I am almost sure.

(Jane isn't listening. She has begun strutting across the stage, top hat, tails, and cane on her shoulder; she is doing aerobic exercises, and is paying no attention to the eight "bachelors.")

BACHELOR NUMBER ONE

Miss? Beggin' yer pardon, miss? We've got a kind of an argle-bargle here.

JANE

(She stops at the wing RIGHT, and looks at them, irritated.)

Oh, shut up, O.K.? It doesn't matter which of you it was, does it? I mean, after he stuck me with *that* thing, he stuck me with his *other* thing, so I died anyway. Anyway, you probably all got off on it.

BACHELOR NUMBER TWO

(Also indignant.)

Hey, lady, that's a load of crap. We never done nothing like that.

JANE

What, never?

BACHELOR NUMBER TWO

You bet your pretty little bottom, never. General Mark Clark would've crucified us. Anyway, the Eye-tie broads was giving it away.

JANE

For a can of Spam, you mean?

* * *

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(She looks at him thoughtfully, then grins and turns to the wings. She pulls an army cot out onto the stage and sits on the edge of it. She pats the cot.)

So what do you think, GI Joe? Remember, I don't want your Spam, and I'm not interested in you. But you've got your gun. I couldn't stop you, could I?

BACHELOR NUMBER TWO

(Dangerously.)

What're you trying to prove, lady?

JANE

What do you think? A heroic fighting man has a right to a little R and R, hasn't he? If you meant to sin, why wait to begin? I can't stop you. Anyway, if you've killed my kids and blown up my house, what's a little gang bang?

BACHELOR NUMBER TWO

You're really asking for it!

(He starts toward her, grimly horny. Then he stops in consternation, feels his groin, shakes his head. He looks at her angrily.)

Hell, lady, you really take the starch out of a fellow.

JANE

(Sympathetically.)

Testosterone running a little low? I guess you haven't killed anybody lately, that it?

(All eight bachelors are muttering as Jane pushes the cot back into the wings.)

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BACHELOR NUMBER TWO

You make us sound like a bunch of animals! We were *soldiers.* I got a Silver Star. If I'd been an officer, I bet it would've been the Medal of Honor!

BACHELOR NUMBER SEVEN

The emperor himself shook my hand!

BACHELOR NUMBER FIVE

It was the shells we carried that made our comrades in the South able to throw off the imperialist yoke!

BACHELOR NUMBER FOUR

Even when we were starving, we fought!

BACHELOR NUMBER THREE

We done what dey tole us to do, ma'am. We was supposed to break right through to Richmond, an' we dang near done it, too. We would've, iffen de generals hadda got some more troops into de Crater 'fore we was all kilt ourselfs.

JANE

Oh, gosh, nobody said you weren't all *brave.* I mean, not counting if you pooped your pants sometimes, right? But you went right on and did the job you were supposed to do. The thing is, what were you so brave *about?*

BACHELOR NUMBER ONE

It was the Huns, miss. They was doin' awful fings in Belgium.

BACHELOR NUMBER SEVEN

For the emperor!

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BACHELOR NUMBER THREE

Dey whupped us, ma'am, when we was slaves. Freedom! An' we kilt dem back.

BACHELOR NUMBER EIGHT

For the Aryan race!

BACHELOR NUMBER FOUR

For the Soviet motherland!

JANE

(As the bachelors are all speaking at once.)

Boys, boys! Let's kind of hold it down, O.K.?

(She looks at Bachelor Number Six.)

What about you, Ensign? Don't you have anything to say?

BACHELOR NUMBER SIX

(Grinning.)

Seems to me you're doing all the taking, hon. Me, I'm just a fly-boy. Drop a couple five-hundred-pounders, shoot up a column of trucks, back on the ship for a malted milk and the night movie — except for that damn MiG. I bet it was a Russki pilot that got me. No damn slopey could've flown like that.

I know what you're saying, though. I was always glad I was a carrier pilot. We didn't get into that real lousy stuff they did on the ground. So don't talk to me about rape and looting and all that — I wasn't anywhere near it. I was in the air, and we had a nice clean war.

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JANE

Do you suppose they felt the same way in the *Enola Gay*?

BACHELOR NUMBER SIX

Now, wait a minute, honey! You've got the wrong guy here. I never dropped any atomic bombs!

JANE

They didn't give you any atomic bombs to drop, did they?

BACHELOR NUMBER SIX

Damn right they didn't, and you know why? Because the U.S. of A. *decided* not to use the Bomb then! We could've, easily enough! We had 'em! Plenty of them. Only, we held them back for humanitarian reasons.

JANE

And maybe also, a little, because they were scared that the Russians had them, too?

(Bachelor Number Six shrugs and looks away, losing interest.)

And then *everybody* had them, remember? England and France, and India and China, and Brazil and South Africa and Israel and Pakistan — And people said that was really O.K., because that was MAD, the Mutual Assured Destruction deterrent, the thing that would keep anybody from ever using one, because everybody knew that nobody could possibly win a nuclear war?

They were wrong about one of those things, remember? But they were enough right about the other. Nobody won.

Here, take a look. Give me a hand, will you?

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(She goes behind the desks and pulls out a new backdrop, puffing with the effort. Bachelors Number Six and One help her, then go back to their places. All the others crane their necks to see. We are now looking at the New England town again — only, it has been nuked. All the church spires are broken and burned out. A few people are moving about in the dirty, ash-tainted snow. We see that some are children in rags, looking hungry, freezing in the cold weather. A few adults look obviously sick. One or two figures seem more energetic; they are shepherding the others to a waiting "ambulance" — it is someone's large sleigh, pulled by a swaybacked old horse. Jane takes off her hat and gathers up the tails of her coat to tuck into the waistband of her tights.)

JANE

The trouble was, the deterrent didn't deter everybody.

(She picks up a TV remote controller from the floor, aims it at the screen, and flicks from scene to scene. We see New York, Tokyo, Moscow, Beijing, Chicago, Rio de Janeiro, Tel Aviv, San Francisco, Cape Town, Paris, Rome, Copenhagen, Melbourne, Singapore, Mexico City, St. Louis, Cairo, Stockholm. They are all in ruins. Jane is talking while she changes channels.)

JANE

It took only one to start it, you know. Then everybody got together to finish it.

BACHELOR NUMBER TWO

(He is bewildered and angry.)

Hey, it wasn't supposed to happen that way! They was supposed to make sure there wasn't any more wars!

* * *

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BACHELOR NUMBER ONE

They said the sime about mine, too, miss.

JANE

Well, what the hell, one out of a million isn't bad, is it? Because this time they were right.

BACHELOR NUMBER SEVEN

(He is incredulous, but dares to be hopeful.)

Pardon, mam'selle, is it that peace is here at last?

JANE

You bet, sweetie. Only, it's a little late for you guys, isn't it? I mean, being all dead and like that.

(She comes over to them and pats the nearest one on the shoulder — insistently.)

So really, now, you better all just lie down again, O.K.? Go ahead. That's the way. . . .

(Grumbling, all eight bachelors get up and tip their desks down onto the floor. When they do so, we see that each of the desks is actually a plain pine coffin. The eight men reluctantly climb in, one after another, each one putting the lid on for the one before him. Jane, grunting, lifts the last lid in place to cover Bachelor Number Eight. Then she begins putting her suit back on. Now we see that it isn't really a space suit. It's an antiradiation suit, and it is spotted and stained with long use.)

* * *

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JANE

(Bowing to audience.)

Well, Merry Christmas to you all, and goodwill to men, and peace on earth. *Really*. I mean, this is the war that finally meant it.

(She gazes at the screen, then flicks the remote controller, and the screen goes blank. All is black. The only thing we see is Jane herself, alone and brightly lit on the empty stage. She puts on her helmet, but before she closes it, she adds:)

There aren't enough of us left for anything else.

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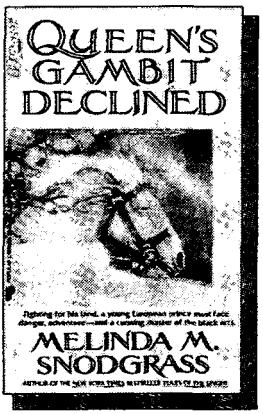

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Needless to say, Melinda is versatile—and therefore perfect for the Questar list.

She's also a very nice person.

When you see me around, ask me to wax poetic about THE SNOW QUEEN (but only if you have a few hours to spare).

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Brian Aldiss is surely one of our most versatile authors. In addition to his SF novels (e.g. the HELLICONIA trilogy) he has written several acclaimed mainstream works, such as LIFE IN THE WEST and A SOLDIER ERECT. His latest novel is FORGOTTEN LIFE (Atheneum), and Roger Corman recently started filming his novel FRANKENSTEIN UNBOUND. Aldiss's short stories for F&SF go back to "Poor Little Warrior" (April 1958) and "The Saliva Tree" (September 1965); it's a pleasure to offer his latest tale; hot, dark, Egyptian...

North of the Abyss

By Brian W. Aldiss

I am not yet born; provide me
With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees
to talk to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a
white light in the back of my mind to guide me.

Louis MacNeice: Prayer Before Birth

THE WEST BANK of the river, so the old legends had it, was the bank of death. There the dead went to their tombs, among the sands and the sunsets.

However that might have been, a barque emerged from the mists veiling the west bank and moved toward mid-channel with steady purpose. It was high in prow and stern. In the stern, a dark figure guided the boat by means of a large steering oar.

The figure was alone in the boat. At its feet stood pottery coffers of curious design, their lids taking the form of heads of owl, wolf, and cat. More curious was the figure of the ferryman himself. He wore a short tunic with stiff pleated kilt, from the belt of which hung a sword. His

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brown arms were bare, adorned with ornamental metal bands at wrists and biceps. Round his neck was a wide bead collar, and he wore a wig to show that this was an official occasion.

The wig enfolded a narrow bony head. The ferryman's sharp nose and shallow jaw, the black fur covering his face, the two sharp erect ears — pointing alertly forward at the *felucca* he was approaching — were those of a jackal. He was not of the world of men and women, although his traffic was with them.

No less disturbing was the unnatural fact that his barque, in its stealthy approach to the *felucca* over the sunset waters, cast no reflection on the darkening flood and no shadow into the depths below its keel.

The *felucca* had departed from the Aswan Sheraton hotel on the east bank of the Nile, and was making its way upstream, its sail taut in the light wind blowing from the north. Not one of the fourteen passengers on the boat had anything to say, as if the gravity of the sunset bore upon their spirits. All fixed their gaze on the distant west bank which, while the sun sank lower, turned apricot against the cloudless sky, as if composed of material more precious than sand.

Oscar North sat in a cramped position in the stern of the *felucca*. He was pervaded by feelings of isolation. There was no one in the boat he recognized, although he believed that they, like him, had embarked on this trip from the immense concrete honeycomb of luxury now falling behind them in ashen distance. No one he recognized, that is, except for a small thin man with sparse hair and hooded eyes into whom North had bumped in the foyer of the hotel on the previous day; this man now turned and regarded North as if he would speak. North evaded his gaze.

North was nearing forty. He had been making every effort to retain a youthful figure, entering into all the sports organized by the department which employed him, while at the same time spending evenings drinking with friends from the office. The features on his wide bony face, in particular his narrow colorless eyes, appeared rather insignificant.

In the files of the multi-national company for which Oscar North worked was a note against his character which said, "Unpromising background." Another note consisted of one word, "Conformist."

Evading the glance of the thin man, North stared about him. To be on water generally excited him, yet this evening he felt only unease, as if this

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were a journey into the unknown instead of nothing more than a tourist outing. The great river seemed to gather lightness to itself as the sky overhead darkened. Already stars glittered and a horn of moon shone superb and metallic overhead. The faces of the other people in the boat dimmed, becoming anonymous.

The thin man leaned forward and tapped North's arm.

"There's Philae," he said.

He pointed in the direction the *felucca* was heading. His voice was confidential, as if he imagined himself to be sharing a secret with North.

All North could see ahead was a confusion of land and rock, black against the cloudless evening sky. The odd palm tree showed like an angry top-knot. The sound of their progress over the waves could almost be the noise of night coming on, closing over Upper Egypt.

The thin man rose from his place and inserted himself on the stern bench next to North.

"I visited Philae with my father, fifteen years back. I've never forgot it. It's magic, pure magic — out of this world, to coin a phrase."

He shook his head dismissively, as if in contradiction of his own words.

North found himself unable to make any response. He recognized an obligation to be pleasant to a fellow American, yet he had come on vacation to Egypt largely to escape his compatriots — in search of what exactly he had yet to discover.

Worse, he felt that somehow this guy understood him, understood his weaknesses. Accordingly, he was defensive and reluctant to talk.

The thin man hardly paused for response, going on to say, "We had an encounter in the lobby of the hotel, if you recall — you and your wife. Pleasant-looking lady, I'd say. She's not accompanying you on this little trip?"

"She didn't feel like it," North said.

"Why's that, may I enquire? They say the new *son et lumière* on Philae is just great."

Again, North found himself unable to reply. Anger and resentment welled up in him as he thought of the violent row with his wife in the hotel room before he left.

"My name's Jackson, Joe Jackson, and I'm from Jacksonville, Florida, mortician by trade, married, divorced, three kids, two grandchildren," said

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the thin man, offering his hand and shaking his head.

"Oscar North," said North, taking the proffered hand.

It was as if the name released a flood of information from Joe Jackson.

"Night's coming on. The ancient Egyptains would claim that Ra, the Sun God, was sailing under the world with the sun safe in his boat . . . they had many odd beliefs like that. Still, people believe pretty strange things even today, in this age of progress, even in the United States. When the *Jacksonville Bugle* ran a poll on education recently, they found that sixty-two percent of the people questioned believe that the sun goes round the Earth, instead of vice versa. . . ."

"Well, I guess people in cities. . . ."

"That don't make no difference." He shook his head. "They got an alternative frame of beliefs here — different mind-set, as they say. It's a Muslim country. You and your fair lady ever visited Egypt before?"

"This is the first time I've been outside the United States and Europe. Europe's pretty Americanized — we own a good piece of it, as you know." He laughed uncertainly.

"Belief — that's the important thing in life," Jackson said. "Me, I'm a religious man. It alters how you look at facts."

It had seemed that the *felucca* was scarcely making progress, but suddenly dark shapes of land were swinging about them as the steersman changed course. Rocks moved in close by the side of the boat, intent on invasion, smoothed in elephantine shapes by the countless past inundations of the waterway. The effect was as if they entered among a concourse of great beasts at a waterhole.

Flat topped stone temples loomed above the mast of the *felucca*, only to disappear behind a shoulder of land. Ahead, as the vessel swung about, they sighted a line of torches illuminating a landing stage and a flight of steps beyond.

Almost as one, the passengers in the boat rose and stood silent, aware they had made a transition from one world to another. Darkness now wrapped about them. Nobody spoke. Couples held on to each other.

The crew jumped ashore and moored the boat at the bottom of the steps. The passengers climbed on to the island and began the ascent. The steps they trod were broad and shallow. Turbanned Egyptians stood by, motioning them on. Other vessels were arriving out of the dark like moths at a flame, other people setting foot on Philae, looking tense and serious.

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While climbing ashore, North tried to evade Joe Jackson, but the thin man appeared at his side. North made no sign. He wanted to give himself over entirely to Philae, without distraction. This was his last evening in Egypt.

"My profession being mortician, I've made a kind of hobby of studying the ancient Egyptians," Jackson said. "They were wonderful folk. In the arts of embalming they were second to none. Second to none."

Again he shook his head, as if denying what he was saying.

"They had secrets and techniques unknown to us today despite all our modern advances. Some experts think they used magic. Maybe they did use magic." He chuckled. "Of course, they had gods and goddesses for everything. I know quite a bit about them. Like this island of Philae is dedicated to the goddess Isis, who was worshipped hereabouts for over a thousand years . . . she was a tricky little bit of goods and no mistake."

Climbing the stairs, North made no response.

"Philae's dedicated to Isis," Jackson repeated. "I guess you knew that from the guide books. How long you and that wife of yours been in Aswan?"

"Two days."

"Two days. That all? What have you seen so far?"

"Shit, we've been resting, Mr. Jackson, taking it easy by the pool. What's it to you?"

"You and your lady are on the fringe of a wonderful world. Vanished but mysteriously still here." His tone suggested he took no offense at North's tone; bores could not afford to take offense. "By day, Egypt's blanked out under a blaze of light. Quite different from Florida's light. Then you go down underground into the dark to the tombs and — wham! — a wonderful colored picture-book of the past opens up. Gods, goddesses, the lot. They sure aren't Christian but they're a lot of fun. Don't miss it."

"Back to Geneva in the morning," North said.

Flambeaux burning in the low wall on their left made stygian the waters beyond. The visitors were cut off from the rest of the world. As they mounted the steps, various imposing stone buildings rose into view. Even Jackson fell silent. A general solemnity gripped everyone, as if they were not merely tourists, in search of little beside sunshine and some distraction, but pilgrims to a sacred shrine.

When they gained level ground, before them stretched several temples,

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picked out of the dark by hidden spotlights, their walls embellished by some of the best-loved gods, Horus, the falcon-headed, Hathor, Nephthys, sister of Isis, and Isis herself, alert, slender, her breasts bare. These giant figures stood as they had stood for three thousand years, incised in the stone with a conviction which seemed to grant them immortality.

Above the temples, night had closed in with its glittering horn. Only in the cloudless west a line of ancient rose light remained, fading, fading fast, the color of regret.

The beauty and tranquility of the scene before him — a tragic quality in it — made North pause. He wished he had it all to himself, without the intrusive Jackson, without the other tourists. Tomorrow it was back to the pressure of commodity broking in the Geneva office.

The posting to the Swiss office had represented promotion for the aspiring Oscar North. Winifred had hated leaving the Washington area, where her family lived. Their marriage had been in decline ever since. Perhaps he should pray to Isis for better things: the thought occurred to him.

He evaded Jackson in the crowd of anonymous people. Attendants were urging everyone across a paved area. More *feluccas* were arriving at the landing stage, materializing out of the dark, more people pouring in for the show. North moved forward with them, determined to get a good position.

He found a place by the rope which held spectators back. The Temple of Isis presented itself ahead, before it a great stone edifice, looming like a cliff, dating from the period of the Ptolomaic pharaohs. Its two towers were illuminated so that their tops faded away as if aspiring to the stars themselves. A measure of calm entered North as he took in the spectacle; it was a sensation he hardly recognized. He reflected on the venerable age of the structures, their solidity and grace, and the way in which so many generations had found peace on this small island in the Nile, worshipping the goddess. A feeling of sanctity still prevailed. The little island had been preserved: no one lived here. There were no houses or shops, only the majestic ruins.

Jackson was at his elbow again.

"Lost you for a minute, Oscar. You don't object if I stand with you? I just don't care too much for all these strangers. Guess I'm more accustomed to folk who've passed on, being a mortician." He chuckled, shaking his head at the same time.

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"It's a wonderful place," North said.

"Too bad your wife isn't with you."

He was not going to be led into a discussion of what had happened to Winifred.

Winny and Oscar North came in from the hotel's pool area and showered in their room. The heat outside had been almost too intense to bear.

"Let's go and sit in the bar and sink a few," he said, drying his hair.

"You were drinking all the time we were out by the pool. Haven't you had enough?"

"You would keep talking to that woman, whoever she was."

"She's nice. She's from Arizona. She's staying a whole two weeks in the hotel. She was telling me—"

"She's a pain in the neck."

"Osk, you never even spoke to her. How do you know what she's like? She's very well heeled, I tell you that."

The phone rang. He moved quickly to answer it.

Covering the receiver, he made a face and said to her, "It's a call from Geneva. Larry wants to speak to me. Can't be good."

Winny was sitting on a chair arm, putting on a shoe. She flung it to the floor in anger. "No, not Larry. Tell him you're not home. Don't speak to him. Tell him to get lost."

But Larry, North's immediate boss, was on the line, and Oscar was listening and smiling and saying, "No, glad to hear from you, Larry, great, just great. How's tricks in Geneva?"

When his face grew serious as he listened, Winny went over and listened too.

"But the Armour account is fine, Larry. Can't you possibly handle it till I'm back Monday? We're only away a week."

"You know I have to be in Paris, Oscar." Larry, unremitting. "If the wrong people get a hold of this story. . . ."

"Tell him to get lost," Winny said. "We've only just arrived."

"We've only just arrived here, Larry."

"Well, if you are prepared to let it slide. . . . That's your decision, Oscar. You know the stuff Armour handles."

"I really don't think it's that urgent, Larry. Look, I mean—"

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"If that's your decision, Oscar, old pal. Of course I'm going to have difficulty explaining it to the meeting tomorrow. . . ."

"Can't you just tell them — tell them I'll be back Friday? . . . Look, suppose I came back Thursday? . . . Wednesday, then?"

"Tell him to stuff his fucking job, Osk!"

"That's entirely up to you, Oscar. Entirely up to you. I don't want to pressure you, but you know how these things go. And there's your future in the company to think about."

"How about if I come back Tuesday, Larry?"

"Do you think Armour would understand? I have to ring them back pronto. You know how it will look if I say you are on vacation and are unavailable. But that's entirely your decision if you want to play it that way." Larry's voice was flat, cold.

"Oh, Jesus, look, Larry — O.K., look. I'll get a flight back tomorrow morning, O.K.?" Forcing sarcasm into his voice he asked, "Will that be soon enough to please you?"

"I leave it entirely up to you, Oscar." The line went dead.

North set the receiver back in its cradle without looking at his wife.

"Oh, you asshole!" she shrieked. "You spoil everything."

A SLENDER MOON shone down on the isle of Philae with sceptered gaze. No wind stirred. The great dark flow of the Nile opened its lips to breathe the island as it ran its course from south to north of the ancient land.

Still the tourists were emerging from the river into the light. They felt the dryness of the air. Rain never fell here; life depended on the artery of the river. Vegetation stayed close to its banks, a thin embroidered strip woven into boundless desert sands. And Joe Jackson pointed to one of the giant figures sinuously carved on the temple wall and said, "See that one? The god with the jackal's head? That's Anubis."

"I think I've heard of him," North said. "What's he do?"

"Anubis mediates between the living and the dead. He connects the visible and the invisible worlds. Quite a boy. He conducts the Act of Judgment which decides whether you spend eternity in the summer stars or the Abyss."

"He's frightening."

"I've got a special interest in Anubis." The hasty shake of the head, the

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nervous mannerism denying what the mouth had spoken. "See, he's the god of medicine and embalming. That's why I've got a special interest. He removes the intestines from corpses and embalms them in pots — pots often shaped like animals — so's they are ready for you when you arrive in the Underworld. And what is the special — hold it!"

He interrupted himself, for music suddenly welled out of the dry earth, the shrill music of an earlier day, music of heat and wine and nudity and the Bronze Age.

Illumination faded from the temple walls. They were washed pale and then sank away into dark like ghosts. For an instant, only the night reigned over Philae.

And the moon shone down, transfixing the island with its purity.

Then colored spots awoke, green, bronze, orange, and the *son et lumière* was underway.

Measured voices, male and female, hired from London, told ancient tales of the gods and goddesses who had once ruled the two kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt. Of Ra, the god of the sun, of his grandchildren, Geb and Nut, god of earth and goddess of sky, and of their children, who included Osiris, the god of the dead, and his sister, Isis, later his wife.

As the preposterous story unfolded, new areas of the temples opened, and turbanned attendants ushered the spectators on to hear the next chapter of the tale in a further chamber of the holy ruin.

The visitors filed solemnly past a long colonnade of which no two capitals were alike. Its ceiling was decorated with stars and flying vultures. Two granite lions guarded the way to the inner temple complex. In the Great Court stood the Birth House. Here was represented Isis giving birth to Horus, Horus as a hawk crowned with the Double Crown, Horus being suckled at the breast of Isis. All the weird progeny, alive on the walls, smoldering in ambers and sullen mauve, appearing or disappearing at the will of the narrative.

And the story went on. Incest, murder, mutilation, brother fighting brother, a great conflagration of mortal sins and aspirations, all played out in an earlier world where the reed beds were full of wild fowl and the woods of deer and leopard and the skies of geese and doves and the minds of human beings with the lees of previous existences before intellect was born.

In all this walking between hypostyle hall, sanctuaries, ritual scenes of offerings to the dusky gods, and tales of flood and fury, Oscar North pro-

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ceeded in a daze, half attending to the task of avoiding Joe Jackson. As the colored lights led the crowds on, shepherding them like dogs controlling a flock of sheep, he was aware of the moon, raining down its light on him between the ornamented columns. It seemed to offer refuge from tormented emotions.

As he moved between light and dark, following narrative and physical path, the story conveyed by remote modern lips got to him. It overtook him like an old belief. He was filled with desire for the vivid world that had vanished thousands of years ago, for the hot spotlight that had once contained its people, animals, and birds within the narrow ribbon of Egyptian dynastic life. As in his own day of the twentieth century, people held conflicting ideas of the afterlife: some holding that death released one to dwell forever among the summer stars, others that death led to a tomb where Anubis would come, dog-faced and dark, to pickle one in preparation for judgment — a judgment that would lead either to the Abyss or to another life, where there were still slaves and dancing girls and wine and perfumes and strips of land to plough.

With all this he compared his own existence, his years in offices and bars and high-rise apartments, his imprisonment by desk and VDU, his anxieties over work and marriage and income. There had never been an Isis in his life, dainty and bloodthirsty. He had submitted to circumstance. There had never been belief. Only fear and a wish to conform.

"I believe we're coming to Trajan's Kiosk," said Jackson's voice at his shoulder. "That's if I remember after all this time. You going to have a bite of supper when you get back to the hotel, Oscar?"

"I don't feel like food," he said.

His mind was in a torment. He had to escape this little man. Then he could think. Perhaps it would even be possible to set his life back on course.

As the crowd filed into the mighty rectangle of Trajan's Kiosk, North obeyed an impulse — he ducked away and hid behind a massive block of granite. Shadow enfolded him. The attendants had not seen him go.

From where he crouched, the narrative could still be heard. Disembodied voices acted out the ancient drama of Osiris and Isis, and the death of the god at the hands of his brother.

He paced about the hotel room, wearing only a towel about his midriff. Winifred had turned her back on him and stood looking out of the win-

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dow at the Nile and the desolate expanses of west bank beyond.

"What else could I do? I had to give in to Larry. You know how these guys ride me. The Geneva office is worse than Washington in that respect. You know that. Besides, the Armour business—"

"Don't tell me about the Armour business," she said, in a low controlled voice. "This isn't the first time you've done this to me."

"What do you mean, to you? I haven't done anything to you. It's what's been done to me. Do you think I can help it?"

He never told her what his work involved. Either Winny did not want to know or could not grasp the details. He felt compelled to explain to her that Armour was one of his most tendentious clients. Through sub-agents, Armour exported thousands of tons of nuclear waste from industrial countries to Third World countries. Now a crisis threatened operations. A customer in an African country had used radioactive wastes bought from an Armour sub-contractor as hardcore for a new road through the capital city. People were getting sick. The facts, long suppressed, had been leaked to a German news agency.

"You think I care?" Winny said, interrupting. "All of Africa can drop dead as far as I'm concerned. What gets me is how you in your stupid dumb way have just loused up my vacation. You wimp, why don't you tell Larry and these Armour people to get lost? How long do you think I'm going to put up with this crap?"

He clutched the back of his neck, feeling one of his migraines coming on. "Get off my back, will you? You think it's my fault? You think I'm responsible for this almighty cock-up?"

She had finally turned round to face him, looking white-faced and mean. She folded her arms protectively over her breasts.

If North tried — as he sometimes did at night before sleep enfolded him — he could remember a time back in Washington when Winny did not bitch at him. She had changed when he had been posted to the Geneva office, when promotion became slow.

He had done his best. Taken her on trips with his office buddies at weekends in the Alps or the Haute Savoie. Humored her wish to have her stupid sister to visit.

Once her face had looked so cute and placid in repose. Now it was flabby with a dull, cold expression which her grey eyes reinforced. Winny turned that cold expression on her husband now, continuing her diatribe.

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"I heard what Larry said. He said it was your decision. You could have told him to get lost. You made the wrong decision one more time."

"What Larry said was a threat. Can't you understand that, you bitch? Larry's a mean careerist bastard."

"Oh, and what are you? You always put the company first. You're a lackey, Osk, that's what you are, a — a minion! I hate you, you're a creep, an asshole."

"Don't call me an asshole. I'm Assistant Regional Director and you know how hard I've worked for the post. The Armour account is volatile. If there's a blip, I have to be there. It's as simple as that. What Larry's saying is they can't do without me. Can't you respect that?"

She crossed the room in fury and confronted him. "Can't you see what a miserable life we lead? Can't you really? Ever since before we married you've put everything into that company. You've slaved and toadied and kowtowed. I've seen it. I've watched every inch of the way. I've seen the people you brought home. Friends, you call them. Enemies, I call them. People you had to be nice to, drunks, bullies, sadists, hardly able to hide their contempt for you while you proceeded to get smashed before I served dinner. Oh, yes, don't deny it. And all their fancy compliments. Freesias for me — god, how I hate freesias. All the time you've put in —"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, can it, will you?" He turned his back on her and struggled into a clean shirt. "I have to earn a living. If I was pissed that was your fault. If only you could have been friendly to all —"

"Friendly! Friendly! Listen, you are about as friendly as that wall." Winifred paused unexpectedly, as if past resentments choked her. She clutched her throat. "You weren't friendly with these people. We got no friends. Larry you call friend. He just rides you. As you ride me. You get what you can out of me, he gets what he can out of you. It's a filthy system. What about our one and only beloved son? Why do you think he ran off from home at the age of fourteen? Just because you —"

"Leave Alex out of this. It's a sore point."

"Of course it's a sore point. Everything's a sore point with you because you've never lived. You've spent your whole life being an asshole. Now you're doing it again, lousing up our one chintzy week off in the sun. Asshole."

He hit her hard with an upward blow of his right hand, feeling his knuckles strike the right side of her jaw. He was amazed how flimsy she

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was. She seemed to blow away. She tumbled across her bed, knocked over the lamp on the locker, fell against her open suitcase, tumbled to the floor in a shower of articles, and lay hidden by the swell of the duvet.

There was silence. North heard a radio playing in the next room.

"Winny?" he said.

Voice of Osiris: "Our treacherous brother, Seth, held a lavish feast for me when you were away, O divine Isis. With him were seventy-two conspirators and a conniving queen of Ethiopia. We drank and sang while the dancing girls danced in their diaphanous robes and slaves scattered flowers about the room."

Voice of Narrator: "Osiris was then King of Egypt. At the moment of his birth, a heavenly voice announced, 'The lord of all the world is born.' Osiris was the first man ever to drink wine. Thus he brought a new thing into the world, and showed his peoples how to plant vines for grapes and cultivate them for the new beverage. He refined the rough customs of his peoples and taught them to honor the gods, and gave them laws. By the same token, he persuaded the ibis-headed god Thoth to invent all the arts, music, sculpture, astronomy and its attendant arithmetic, and, above all, the letters of the alphabet, in order that wisdom might be recorded to pass from one generation to another, in the way that the waters of the Nile were canalized to irrigate distant fields."

Voice of Orisis: "But my brother Seth was jealous of me, and coveted our sister, Isis, for his wife."

Voice of Isis: "While you were away in distant lands, O my Osiris, Seth caused to be made a chest of great value, richly decorated, its metals and jewels worked by the finest artisans. The interior of the chest fitted your measurements exactly."

Voice of Osiris: "At the feast, Seth announced, 'He who can lie down in this chest and fit into it exactly, to him shall I give the chest as prize.' No one could win the chest. Then my brother challenged me to try. I did so. The conspirators slammed down the lid upon me."

Voice of Isis: 'O my king, how you were trapped! Hot lead was poured about the joins of the chest, so that you suffered and died. I knew you had gone from this world without the need of telling. Seth threw your coffin into the Nile, where it drifted to the sea and was lost. My sister, Nephthys, the wife of Seth, gave birth to a baby boy whom she deserted. The dogs

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Tonight, he would stay here and exorcise — whatever had happened in the hotel room.

saved him. He grew fierce and loyal and joined me in the search for Osiris's body."

Voice of Narrator: "The faithful Isis's search was at last rewarded, and she found the chest, some say in the Nile Delta, some off the coast of Syria. Placing the body of her dead husband on the deck of the boat, she sailed home in triumph."

Voice of Osiris: "Such was her warmth and her love that she roused me back to life for a brief while. I returned to this world of circumstance, and was so stirred by the beauty of Isis when she revealed herself to me naked that I was able to take her unto me and impregnate her before again returning to the Underworld, there to reign as Lord of the Dead."

Voice of Isis: "So I could continue the line of the gods. With the aid of Anubis, I gave birth to Horus, who flew from my womb fully fledged as a bird. Later, Horus would avenge his father."

Voice of Narrator: "This early resurrection myth comes to us from an epoch before the birth of formal religions, from the long golden days of the Bronze Age, when humankind remained still on a par with nature and did not tyrannize it. For her powers as wife and mother, Isis was worshipped here on Philae, her island, sacred to her name, and here, on a night such as this, we may imagine that she still has power over living men and over their hearts."

Oscar North peered above the slab of masonry which hid him. The crowds of spectators at the light show were now far away. He saw them merely as a black mass, insignificant below the ancient capitals and architraves, a herd who would be leaving shortly and dispersing to their Western-style hotels.

He would be staying.

Tomorrow, he must fly back to work, to the offices in Geneva. Tonight, he would stay here and exorcise — whatever had happened in the hotel room. When he tried to turn his thoughts in that direction, he met with a frightening blank. But the island of Philae would be a sanctuary in which he might be able to repossess himself before confronting the world of mammon again. The moonlight might remake him. Or the solitude. Or

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Isis. Or whatever it was lingering out of reach which he had never tasted. It was okay for Osiris, but he, Oscar North, had been imprisoned in a chest all his damned life.

Trust her to complain. Winifred came from a reasonably stable background. Tyrone North, Oscar's father, had always drifted in and out of jobs. There had been no security for the family, little education for the boys, as they moved from one big city to another. When adolescent, Oscar had run away from home, to seize on what opportunities he could. Sure, he had stayed with the company — and had educated himself at night school. Had made something of his life. Of course there had to be sacrifice.

Too bad about Alex, their kid. Alex had taken after his old grandpa, he was a bad coin, and no use thinking about it. Why didn't Winny shut up about Alex? Well, fact was, he'd never hear from her on that subject again.

The *son et lumière* was over. Music came up, and white lights. From his hiding place, North could see the turbanned attendants directing the crowds away, tramping toward the point where the *feluccas* were moored against the harbor wall. That fool Jackson would be among them.

Mortician! What a profession!

The tramp of feet died. The electric lights were switched off.

Moonlight shone down on North. He looked up at the silver horn, thanking it for its lights, sub-vocalizing the words. As a small boy, he had been afraid of the moon, afraid that monsters would jump out at him from the shadows it cast.

He rose slowly, and went to stand in the shelter of Trajan's Kiosk. It was probable that the island remained unoccupied during the night; there was no habitation as such; but he could not be sure. What he greatly wished was to be alone here, communing with Isis.

The sound of footsteps came to him, of sandals slapping against stone. North stood rigid. He watched as a shadowy figure approached, carrying a dim torch. It proceeded through the ancient ruins, passing on the other side of the wall by which North waited.

Slipping off his shoes, North followed the man at a distance. It was a robed Egyptian who smoked a cigarette as he walked along, no doubt checking to see that all was well after the day's intake of visitors.

The man came at last to the water's edge. A little way out on the flood, lights with trembling reflections marked where the *feluccas* had begun to carry their freight of passengers back to their hotels.

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As North's gaze searched the boats, he saw a passenger stand up and wave. It was Jackson. North believed he had been sighted. A moment later he realized that the man from Jacksonville was merely making a dramatic gesture in the direction of the island. It was good to know he was out of the way.

Mindlessly, a woman passenger caught Jackson's gesture and stood up to imitate him. The idea caught on. In no time, everyone stood up sheep-like and was waving to Philae as it faded from their view into the stillness of the night.

Uninterested in the tourist antics, the Egyptian had walked down to the bottom of the shallow steps, where a second man waited. As they talked, the first man threw his cigarette into the Nile. Its spark was instantly quenched. After some while, as North watched and waited, the men climbed into a small boat, hoisted sail, and set their backs resolutely on Philae.

North was left in sole possession.

He stood erect. He raised his arms and stretched.

"Isis!" he called.

The word echoed over the stones, fading toward the ancient buildings, clear and ghostly under the moon. A sense of sanctity came to him like a piped melody.

Cautiously at first, he began to walk about.

The moonlight, raining down, embalmed him in light. It caught under his eyelids. The silence, the mildness of the night, the sense of ancient stones underfoot, the almost unheard meditative utterance of the river — these had the effect of altering his consciousness. He was no longer himself. Rather, he was sensitized to a number of impressions which moved through his mind like a breeze through a copse. All the gods and goddesses of ancient Egypt became possible, in their variety, their human failings, their mischief, their grace. He found himself in tune with their music.

There they were, elusive as a breeze, beauty, night, sunlight — life. Fresh areas of his brain opened to him, like the unsealing of a long-closed tomb. The conventional Western idea of the old Egyptians as being obsessed with death was wrong; they had been possessed by life, their lives lived under an eternal clear sky, and so in love with that existence they had invented an afterlife which echoed as nearly as possible the delights

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and freedoms of this, their ribbon of Nile-bound existence which flowed all too swiftly from birth in the far mountains to death in the low delta.

The West had imposed a negative image. It was a transference wish. It was in the West that life had perished, not here. Life in the West had turned itself into a series of non-biodegradable boxes. The hours in the office, the hours spent commuting, the hours spent in negative ways, gossiping in the golf club bar, watching television. Departmentalized life, shut away in cities, in small apartments.

These notions arose wordlessly in his thoughts, amazing him.

Winny was right. He had never loved her. He had found no way to express his love.

Yet always on the fringes of his mind — somewhere — had been an awareness of the desert and the river of life flowing through it, of wild life rattling in the marshes and flocks of birds winging above. Almost within reach, just not for him.

And that absurd plurality of gods — perhaps these vanished peoples did not belive in Life with a capital L. They merely had lives, not the abstraction of Life, and the multiplicity of gods reflected that human immediacy. A fecundity of beings! — How much more to be desired than a joyless monotheism!

All this poured into North's awareness.

Instead of bringing despair, it brought him joy. Joy that at last — even if late — even if too late — he had touched a secret reality and found it something to be embraced.

"Isis!" he called. "Where are you? Come forth."

He was on her island. This moment in moonlight contained the whole of his imaginative life. It expanded to embrace the world.

He was overwhelmed — or not overwhelmed because not himself.

The night was absolutely still except for a distant bark of a dog, the fluid note of the river accentuating a waiting quality.

Walking in a trance, North patrolled his new-found territory, treading from shade to brightness, brightness to shade. His island was a mere stepping stone between the two banks of the Nile, one hundred and fifty meters long by four hundred and fifty meters wide. He made a circuit through the echoing temples and arrived back at the landing stage.

As he stood looking down the flight of steps at the water, dark in the moonlight, a barque moved noiselessly to the mooring. It carried a black

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sail, which the sole occupant of the boat expertly hauled down. He stepped ashore almost immediately, ascending the steps without pause, toward North.

North shrank back, but was unable to avoid detection. The figure was beckoning him.

He took the newcomer's oddity with an ill tremor which ran through his body. His eyes were small and black as black coral. He wore a white tunic, with bracelets at biceps and wrists. And he had the head of a jackal. His ears pointed alertly at North.

"I want you, Oscar," said Anubis.

There was no sound in the bedroom after the last article had fallen out of Winifred's suitcase to the floor. From where Oscar North stood, his wife's body was out of sight behind the bed.

He remained where he was, dressed only in shirt and towel. After a moment, she began to make faint scrabbling noises.

His mouth had gone dry. Padding into the bathroom, he poured himself a glass of water from their bottle and drank it. Then he put on his slacks.

Winifred was sitting up gingerly, patting her mouth, which was bleeding.

"Maybe that'll teach you not to call me names," he said. "Just keep your trap shut in the future."

She said nothing.

He felt an urge to continue the quarrel. "I don't want to go back to Geneva any more than you. It's just something I have to do, and you know it."

She said indistinctly, "I'm not coming back with you, you bastard."

He went over to her and looked threatening. "Oh yes, you are. Let's not get into that hassle again. Remember we had that one when we left Washington. You didn't want to go to Europe." He put on a silly voice. "You didn't want to go to Geneva. You were afraid the terrorists might get us. You were afraid the Commies might get us. You were afraid — Christ knows what you weren't afraid of. Fact is, our standard of living has been enhanced since we left the States — not to mention my pay scale. There's a price to be paid for that, and we have to be realists and pay it. That's why we're grabbing a flight back tomorrow, and that's all about it. Now get up and get dressed. Move it."

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She did not reply. She drew up her bare knees and rested her head on them, so that her streak-dyed blonde hair fell forward.

"Come on, Winny," he said, more gently. "I didn't hurt you."

"You did hurt me," she said, without looking up. "You're always hurting me. You don't care one bit about me, any more than you cared for Alex. You've even ceased to fake caring about me, and that hurts, too."

She began to weep.

"Oh, for Jesus's sake," he said.

He began to pace about the room, threatening her with all kinds of things if she did not pull herself together, threatening her with leaving her on her own — "alone in Egypt," as he put it.

"You didn't want to go to Switzerland because it wasn't America. When I grabbed this chance of a winter holiday you didn't want to come to Egypt because it wasn't Switzerland. What the hell do you want?"

"I want to be consulted, damn you. I want to be a part of your life."

"Oh, you're part of my life all right," he said, sarcastically. "You're my anchor — the part that drags me down."

Winny looked up then ghastly, muzzle blood red, face pallid, like a tormented animal.

"Will you show pity for me, Osk? You think I like to be so miserable? I don't drag you down. You were down. You've never grown out of that slum boyhood of yours, that slum father. Try to see beyond your own eyes."

"That comes well from you! Spoiled brat, Daddy's little girl! You're always phoning him, the old bastard. He poisons you against me, he tells you not to trust any of my buddies, he —"

"Oh yes, and when did you ever like any of my friends?"

It was true. He disliked her friends, she disliked his. He tucked his shirt into the top of his slacks and turned away.

"Get up and start packing, and just don't cross my tracks."

Quietly, she said, "I told you, I'm not coming back with you. I'm through."

"You'll come if I have to drag you on that plane by your hair." He swung back toward her, face ugly. She knelt up behind the bed, elbows on it to steady her aim, and pointed a gun at him, clutching it with both hands to control her trembling.

"You're not going to touch me again, you bastard. Stay away from me."

He recognized the weapon at once. It was a small pearl-handled re-

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volver her father had given her some years ago — father, big in electronics, fancying himself as having links with the Old West, buyer up of dude ranches and Remington paintings. Winny had insisted on taking the weapon to Europe, "to protect herself," she had said when they first argued about it. He had no idea she had brought it with her to Egypt.

"Don't you dare point that thing at me, you little bitch!"

"I'll fire!" she yelled as he rushed at her. The revolver went off almost simultaneously.

He stopped dead, raising both hands to his chest.

"Oh, Jesus, Win," he said. "I loved you. . . ."

It was amazing how people didn't understand.

WHEN THE flagstone was lifted, a black rectangle appeared in the expanse of moonlight. Steps led down into the stony night. The sound of rushing water came up from below, and a smell of mold.

Anubis had mysteriously acquired followers, human in shape, blank of face, white of eye. One of the followers came forward, carrying a large concave shield of polished bronze. He positioned the shield at such an angle that moonlight was reflected into the opening, to light a way down the steps.

The jackal-headed god motioned North to proceed. Reluctantly, North moved to the first step; his legs carried him almost automatically down into the depths. He heard Anubis stepping behind him, saw his shadow with its pointed ears extended on the steps in front of him.

The obscurity was lit by the ghostly reflected light. They came to a landing and a bend in the stone staircase. Another of Anubis's slaves was positioned there, with another shield. He reflected the moonlight round the corner, so that they could see to descend still further into the earth.

They reached a quayside where a wooden boat, moored by ropes secured to iron rings set in the stones, awaited them, rocking to and fro under the force of a strong current. Half-naked oarsmen saluted the dark god as he strode up the narrow gangplank. Following, North saw for the first time the tail of Anubis, curling from under his skirt. Sight of it scared him terribly.

Although another slave was positioned with a burnished shield at the quayside, there was little light to see by as they cast off — a mere nimbus

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of a suspicion of moonlight. North supposed that the blind black beads of Anubis's eyes saw everything.

They swung out into the stream. The oarsmen rowed furiously, the helmsman shouted the time, and they headed for the west bank.

Water rushed by. The ceiling above the river was painted with golden stars and lines of baboons.

After a long battle against the current, they arrived at a mooring and went ashore. North's eyes were now better accustomed to the gloom. He saw immense colonnades with imposing buildings behind them, incised with columns of hieroglyphic inscription. People moved here like shadows, silent on bare feet. No music sounded, no sun or moon shone; only a ghost of light reflected from shields maneuvered by slaves paraded along the quayside, each man appearing much like his neighbor and chained to him by a bronze chain, like some grotesquely enlarged Christmas decoration.

Anubis padded forward without looking back. North was torn between fear of following and fear of losing his only guide in this forlorn necropolis. He had little choice but to follow the sturdy figure with its long brush-like tail.

Beyond the imposing facade of the colonnade were buildings of lesser majesty. These inferior buildings soon deteriorated into hovels of mud, their windowless eyes gaping into the street, squares of greater darkness within the darkness. They were thatched casually with branches of palm. North was reminded of the villages he had passed outside Aswan. They came to fields where bare-chested brown workers labored in the corn. He could see that the corn was poor and thin, the heads withered. A chariot rumbled by, but the horse pulling it was a skeletal beast without eyes. Overhead were doves; their wings were paper-thin; he saw that they were in fact mere papyrus birds suspended from a painted ceiling and designed to simulate reality. When they reached a crossing of the ways, a farmer stood over a fire, but the flames were mere spirit flames, like St. Elmo's fire. The farmer himself looked mummified, his features withered and afflicted.

The dirt under foot was dry and rose in clouds as they walked. Dust sprinkled down from nearby palm trees.

"Where are we?" he called in his apprehension.

Anubis made no response, plodding on with dull footfalls.

But an answer to his own question occurred to North. Gods were

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sustained by religious belief. Belief was their lifeblood. Without belief they withered like vampires without blood. He came from an America where the official god, the Christian god, was withering under many forms of disbelief, science and capitalism among them. Even omnipotence had its day. The great thriving world of belief in ancient Egypt had drawn on centuries of worship from priests and congregations. But that belief —like all beliefs — had gone out like a slow withdrawing tide, defeated by Christianity among other things.

Only on the isle of Philae — perhaps only then by the light of the moon or the artificial lighting of *son et lumière* — could the old gods still find nourishment. Gradually, the great department store run by Ra, the sun god, and Osiris and Isis, was having to close. It was reduced to showing only second-rate goods in its window. Its lease had expired.

He regretted it.

He knew what had brought this situation about. History. Technological development. The swing of so-called 'progress,' the most deceitful word in the dictionary. Change. Simple change. The old order changed, giving place to the neo. He was a neo in this old place.

They had arrived at a building like a barn, with an inelegant square door.

"Hall of Judgment," announced Anubis.

The jackal-headed god looked back, reached out, and grasped Oscar North's hand. He felt the clasp of that dry feral hand as a psychic shock. Anubis dragged him forward into the building.

Isis was there.

He did not need telling who she was.

She was dainty, young, eternal, supreme. She at least — at her Philaean shrine — still had psychic energy and could generate light. The interior of the building glowed with her vitality.

She was dusky, slender, sleek, tall, imposing yet infinitely available. Her great eyes were rimmed with kohl. Hers was the Eye, the great eye of life. She wore on her head as if it were part of her skull a crown of the thorns of Hathor, with a solar disc between the horns. From the disc, from her whole body, light flowed, and evil was trodden under her sandal. A golden cobra coiled from her forehead, denoting power.

A plain white sheath dress covered her body. A diadem of green malachite adorned her hair and wig, which were coated with beeswax and resin. Brace-

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lets and anklets of similar stone decorated her limbs. She carried an *ankh*, symbol of life, in one hand.

Anubis raised his hands in the symbol of greeting. North sank to his knees. The goddess radiated powerful perfumes, *balanos*, hibiscus, and other flowers. And a goddess scent . . . at once rousing and quelling.

She did not even glance at North, instead exchanging a few words with Anubis, who dragged at North, pulling him powerfully to his feet again.

The manner in which her glance slid so humiliatingly away from him brought Winny to North's mind. Toward the end, she too had not wished to look at him — until she had to take aim with the revolver.

And she could have been his personal Isis, his woman of radiance and power. Instead, he had slighted her by seeking for power elsewhere, in the air-conditioned offices of the multinationals, so reducing her to a nagging slut. That was worse than what he had done to himself. . . .

The penitence vanished as soon as it had dawned, washed out by luminance.

Having had eyes only for the gleaming figure of the goddess, North realized belatedly that the chamber they were in was crowded with figures coming and going on mysterious business. Many had human bodies with animal heads. Those with most authority — often directing slaves — were most animal. They wore striking tunics with the Egyptian kilt, and were bewigged, like Anubis, with blue matted hair which hung heavy on their shoulders.

Some of these formidable beings crowded about a gigantic table, one end of which was scrolled. A horrifying surgical operation was taking place on the table, supervised by a stunted being with the head of a crocodile and eyes of a goat. To see this creature engaged in some kind of co-ordinated activity — wielding a large scalpel, indeed — brought home to North how deeply he was caught up in myth. Here in this dungeon of life were the hieroglyphics of human concern: he was witnessing one corner of what had once been a self-sufficient world-view, embracing the desires and torments of a species emerging from the animal to seek explanations for the wonderful natural world in which it found itself, with its waters, vegetation, wild life, storms, and succession of days and nights ruled over by sun, moon and stars.

As Anubis dragged him nearer the operating table, he saw that a man in the garb of a warrior lay on the table. The warrior still wore a helmet of

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ferocious aspect, with basketwork armor on chest, abdomen, and legs. In attendance on him was a formidable woman dressed in red, very broad, with powerful arms. She had the head of a lioness, which she turned languidly in North's direction; taking him in at a glance, she then swung her head away again. North recognized her from a guide book he had looked at on the plane from Geneva. This was Sekhmet, goddess of war, renowned for violence and strength.

She sprawled on the operating table, and purred as the warrior was cut open from throat to pubis. The crocodile-head with his assistants opened the man up like a book. Rib-bones creaked. The warrior lay with open eyes, staring at nothing. Sekhmet purred more deeply.

Jars and glasses of medicaments were brought up, together with rolls of linen and live snakes to be milked of their venom. An embalming process was taking place, all performed with routine care by those involved.

North had little time to regard this fearsome sight, for he was pulled over to a great pair of scales, in which Anubis evinced intense interest. He left North standing in order better to inspect a weighing ceremony which had evidently been awaiting his arrival.

Small men with wolf- and dog-heads, encased in green linen tunics, were fussing over the scales. Towering above them was the god in charge — Thoth, the scribe, the ibis-headed one, his eyes blackly calculating above his long yellow beak. Thoth wore a thick yellow wig, crowned by a crescent moon, from which light poured.

Thoth and Anubis conferred. The former's voice was light and hesitant, while Anubis's was gutteral, growling, and fast.

As they talked, the amanuenses brought over to the scales the soul of the dead warrior, contained in a small red vase. It was to be placed on one of the bronze pans of the scales, while a feather from a wild goose was to be placed on the other.

This was the ceremony of judgment. Thus was the warrior to be judged, according to whether his life had been good or evil. The scales would decide whether he would be allowed to attain the bliss of the summer stars, or go to the infernal regions, the Abyss.

All this North understood. It was being acted out in front of him. And in the vast chamber other warriors waited, strangers now to the world above and due for embalming and judgment. Their faces were grey and bloody. They stood on their dead feet, submissive to the law of the underworld.

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North was not submissive. He was a citizen of the United States. He had no wish to undergo these alarming processes.

Anubis had his back to him, examining the scales.

North turned to run.

He made a dash for the nearest door.

A sound like a cymbal-clash clanged in his head. He was aware of the red-clad Sekhmet leaping down from the operating table and bounding in his direction with all the energy of a lioness.

But it was Isis who struck. Isis, the beautiful and terrible, mother and destroyer.

It seemed she merely raised a hand in North's direction. He saw the movement from the back of his head. Her luminance increased.

He was grovelling on a grassy bank. She was standing on him, smiling, swinging a great sword.

He was trying to swim the Nile. She was bearing down upon him, riding a crocodile.

He was flying on white wings. She was astride an eagle, firing golden arrows at him.

He lay on his back on the stone floor, paralyzed. Isis had already turned away. Two minions were scooping him up and carrying him toward the operating table, from which the body of the warrior, now swathed in linen bandage, was being removed. He could not think. A tiny moon burned in his skull. He could see it, could distinctly see hieroglyphics neatly turned in columns on his skull's inner walls, though their meaning was lost on him.

As he wandered under the neat columns, padding softly up innumerable stairs, he was also aware that the great dark form of Anubis loomed above him, as if to tear him apart. It appeared to him no contradiction that he was at once climbing the many steps inside his skull, glancing into its apartments, and also lying on the operating table. A scalpel shone in the glare of Isis.

"First, something for you to drink," said Anubis.

He thrust at North a misty beaker in which reposed an inch or two of a dark liquid. Unable to resist, North took it and swallowed. It was a bitter medicine, tasting of wood smoke and herbs.

He was wearing a lion mask and dancing. The papyrus reeds danced also. The music was shrill, with flutes and stringed instruments. The whole village dances about me. This year — plenty — feasting, fat cattle.

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He was rushing in his chariot, desert hot about him. Ahead, the waterhole. The excitement of the chase. Dogs by my wheels, yipping as they sight the antelope. Arrows fly, the sun bleeds. But with nets we capture one antelope alive. I hold it, its eyes wild with terror. He embraced it, kissed its foamy mouth.

He was in the flood, fleeing here and there, a fish. The annual inundation. Sparkling shallows, then mud. Bigger fish ahead.

Then being a different fish, tame. I swim round in a vase on the high priest's table. Every day, sounds of worship. The great, the echoing temple. I can foretell eclipses.

Trudging the muddy field, my ox dragging the plough before me. Flies, the hollow curve of my stomach. He is the near-naked farmer. Up before dawn each day. The snake crouching in the ashes of the stove.

It's me, Hathor, the she-ox, named after the goddess so that I may be strong and work all day. Soon, soon, food and shade and the stench of the household. My shoulders creak. Do I command the sun? It follows where I go.

He longs for marshes again. He is the tame goose. Here comes my owner to feed me, except — as he sticks his neck from the basket, he sees the knife in the owner's hand, bright as a sliver of evening sun.

He fights and struggles under his hallucinations. For a moment he is the husband of Isis, bearing her down on a golden shawl. Flashing lips, the secret parts of a goddess, blinding to mortals. Tastes of syrup, overwhelming embraces, a wigwam of hair. Joy, joy, and upward slide, source of merriment and all lived life. A million births born from their union. Genius, triumph, the stars in a great sweet hurricane blowing. The glitter of the dagger.

And all the time the little dark people were hurrying up and down the stairs of his brain, unloading everything, bearing it away. The whole castle denuded, defenseless, empty. The closure of windows, the excluding of the light.

Someone with a falcon head was helping him up from the table, another warrior was taking his place. His mind still swam from the dose of anesthetic Anubis had administered. He was hollow, frail.

It was impossible to take notice of what was happening.

Now it seemed as if he was again in a boat. It had a high curved prow

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like the beak of a bird, and made good speed over the water. The water was perhaps the Nile, or perhaps that other dark river which flows somewhere far below the Nile.

Anubis told him that his soul had failed the test. He was not destined for the summer stars. That was the judgement.

"What then?" North asked.

"You go to the Abyss."

"Is the Abyss very bad? Tell me."

Anubis nodded his jackal head.

"It is where the damned go."

He was still confused by the potion he had been made to drink. It seemed he could hear the creak of oars, rrrurrrk, rrrurrrk, rrrurrrk, or perhaps it was his backbone as he strove to gain a sitting position.

"My soul was too heavy with sin?" he asked.

The jackal-headed god made no response, perhaps because none was needed, perhaps because they were pulling rapidly into a quayside.

His sense of sound was distorted. What he thought at first was the noise of a waterfall proved to be the music of a harp, played by a blind harpist sitting with her back to the ship's mast. She continued to play without interruption as they drew in against the quay.

"Out you get," said Anubis. "And take these with you."

North was looking about him in bewilderment. The light was peculiar, transfixing buildings as if they were semi-transparent; but it seemed to him, unless he imagined it, that he was back at the Sheraton hotel. It loomed above them. He could see the corner balcony of the room he shared with Winny.

He took the objects Anubis gave him almost absent-mindedly.

"Ra's sunboat will soon achieve the eastern sky," said the god. Perhaps it was a form of farewell, though the fur-covered face in no way changed its solemn expression. He motioned to his rowers and the boat began to pull back into the river.

Still numb, Oscar North looked down at the objects he had been given.

A small red glass vase, in which his soul fluttered.

A pottery coffer, capped by a lid in the form of a cat's head, heavy to hold because it contained his preserved intestines, which he would certainly need in the Abyss.

And a return ticket to Geneva.

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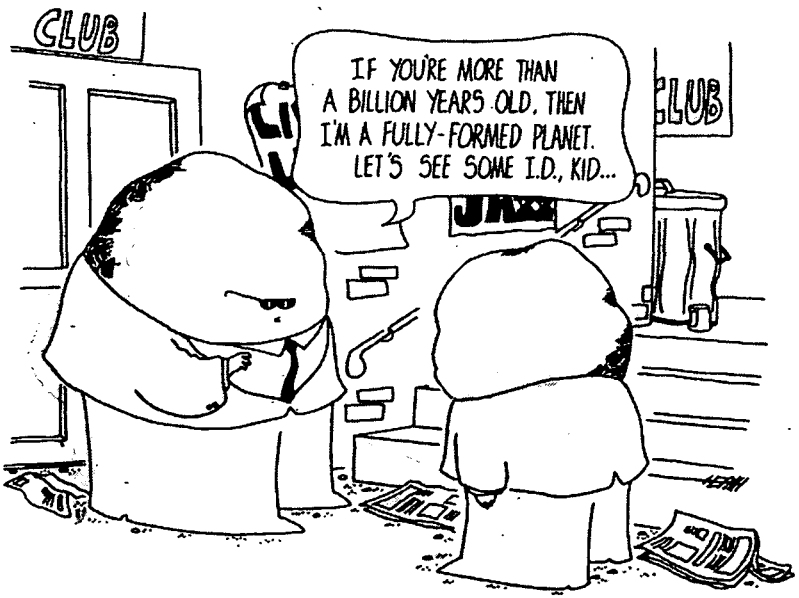
* * *

Already, the boat was entering the mists which concealed the mid-channel. In the stern, a dark figure with a jackal-head was guiding the boat by means of the large steering oar. He was not of the world of men and women, although his traffic was with them.

His barque in its stealthy retreat cast no reflection on the flood, and no shadow into the depth below its keel.

And the voice of the harpist came faintly to North where he stood:

"Even though you are in the realm of ghosts
Imprisoned by what you most believe
Yet you will see the sun to shine in the sky
And the moon to remind you of the shining truth. . . ."



ASTEROID MINOR

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Barry Malzberg's first story for F&SF was the unforgettable "Final War" (April 1968), and in a relatively short time thereafter he published hundreds of short stories and many novels, including BEYOND APOLLO (a John Campbell award winner). For Malzberg, the ultimate science fictional "problem" may be the predicament of the SF writer himself; see, for example, his novel HEROVIT'S WORLD and the story below.

O Thou Last and Greatest!

By Barry N. Malzberg

IN THE CORNER a strange and preoccupied man with acromegaly, over by the swinging doors a nervous and pontificating Thomas Wolfe; within easy reach of the crucifix that hangs (for easy observance) over the bar is Mary Flannery O'Connor herself — but my attention for the moment does not devolve upon these oft-regarded and revered figures, being focused instead somewhat closer in. Upon my own astonished reflection, that is to say, which is cast back through all the shadows of the strange and interior light. You're doing all right, I encourage myself, giving a speculative wink, doing fine, holding your own; no one will ever know the truth.

Which is flummery, of course, just a means of cajoling myself, encouraging myself, trying to force courage; I am still the only science fiction writer at this steaming and clamorously eternal reception, and I fear that at any moment large hands will grasp my elbow, mild and efficient custody will be taken of lapels, and I will be taken in disgrace from this

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grand establishment and without possibility of return. I shudder at the thought of this humiliation, thinking how much at this moment I must look like an imposter at this reception . . . but the fear may very well be self-imposed. Certainly very little attention is being paid to me in these chaotic premises, and my secret may well be safe. Besides, I have published mysteries, a mainstream story or three, some mainstream novels, once had a story reprinted in *Short Story International* and the Italian *Playboy*, have been the modest, tentative beneficiary of some modern academic perspective of science fiction. Perhaps it will be all right. If matters threaten, I could define myself as a conceptualist, a fabulist — a magical realist, if you will.

"Oh wandering," Thomas Wolfe says, catching my eye and raising a twinkling glass, "oh wandering and the earth again, the flowers, the scents, the tropes, the buzz of dying insects in the humid air, the sounds and smells of America itself, the vastness of this continent spread out under us like a decayed and bracing dream, not under the tent of the heavens this America, but instead tented cities, exiled to the bare and bone spaces of the deserts of the soul—" And so on and so forth; it would be possible to quote Tom at distinguished and sprawling length; well launched as he seems now, he is a fit candidate for stenography — but my attention has already shifted, has moved down the line of the bar, past my companions and compatriots to that small, half-concealed door through which in due course the Great Redeemer will emerge with judgments and blessings, confidences and assessments for all of us: it is important for me, I think, to maintain a position of poised and committed alertness at all times, because I, more than anyone else in this place at the present time, am aware of the consequences of judgment, and it would behoove me to exist in a state of preparation. Or so, in any event, my stream of consciousness threads, like a Wolfe monologue, as I grip the panels of the bar, looking at the empty glass before me, and try to assess my position in relation to this difficult situation.

"Is this seat taken, son?" my cadaverous fellow of acromegalic tint says to me, nodding at the suddenly vacant stool on my left. Here a space; on the wall now, a prating Wolfe slowly, slowly subsiding under the insistent and rigorous gaze of Mary Flannery O'Connor; over in the corner, a belligerent Hemingway is being tamed again. Spaces open and spaces close; perspective changes most rapidly and dangerously in these last of days —

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let your attention shift for a moment, and you are apt to be on the street, as James T. Farrell has found to his dismay more than a few times. My purchase on this situation is not assured. "Sure looks unoccupied, fella," the acromegalic gent says, and sidles next to me. A glass of wine appears before him in peremptory fashion; it is one of the characteristics of this place to skimp on service. Prestidigitation and the infusion of magic certainly solves the labor problem, and parakinetics will take the place of bouncers. "You look familiar," my new companion says. "But then, everyone in this place looks familiar, sort of, even the strangers. Name is Howard, by the way. Used to live in Providence before the change."

Providence, I think, and then the identity of the acromegalic wine drinker becomes clear to me. "Nice town, that; I think I stopped by there once." This is a lie, but lies are our most serviceable version of truth in these places. "Admire your work," I say untruthfully. "Read most of it," I say, expanding the lie. There is no harm in this; one must live ungratefully, sponsor untruth in order to survive. A chastened Tom Wolfe is saying something like this in a desperate whisper to Mary Flannery, the intense details of which I can pick up, along with Hemingway's bellowing and the rattling of the greater constituency in the kitchen — because all of our senses are preternaturally alert here, nothing (as in life) escapes us, everything may be inferred. "*Colour Out of Space,*" I say wisely. "Good one. Real good one. Swear by it, reread it at least three times a year." A jigger of gin, as if in compensation for this intelligence, materializes before me, and I lift it, drink it at one swoop, allow the gasp to overtake me. When I have recovered — that is to say, when the blade of Mary Flannery's contempt has once again cut through Tom's rhetoric and my own consciousness —my companion is asking me my name. "I know I've read you," he says, "read you a *lot.* I read everyone, here and now. Before and after. But the name, the name doesn't quite come through; if you could just give me a clue —"

I shrug. We all lie to one another — I to him, he to me, all of us to everyone — it is our only means of accommodation. Raised in lies, exhausted by their necessity, we could really know nothing else — or so our keepers point out to us during our occasional reorientation sessions. "Name's so-and-so," I say, and give it to him; for one flat instant, there is a desperate bewilderment, even panic, in his eyes, but then the mask of his own self-involvement clanks shut, and he says, "Of course, of course. And

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so many times. This and that and all the times of our perpetuation, knowing then that the unspeakable that lingers, that quakes and wails at the coffin of our lives can be revealed in an instant, an instant of *light* behind which the ravening jaws of that beast, circumstance —"

And so on and so forth. It must be pointed out that we all do this, every one of us; even Emily Dickinson under the stroke of midnight or judgment will occasionally bellow effusive quatrains. It is the sound not of our companions but of our own voices that we seek, the thread of our voices carrying us ever back farther and farther to the origin of our own circumstance. . . . If we did not have our own voices (and really, what else was there for us, ever?), we would be locked into individual cubicles, and all of this, the colors out of space, the noise and light surrounding us —would be gone. It is not community but id that we bring to this place — or so I have heard Emily and Tom theorize at those exhausted points of our timelessness where the service has, temporarily, given out and sleep has not yet taken hold.

"— and so to the ravening beast," my companion concludes, "and to the last spaces under the earth."

"I heard that!" Tom says. He pushes away from Mary Flannery (who has gripped the crucifix) and lumbers toward us, hand extended. "That's my kind of talk; that's *my* earth you see, its lost and gleaming colors, intermingled —" And he continues on in this vein for an active and considerable period while I put my hands carefully on the gleaming shelf, haul myself upright, finish off the new jigger that has been placed before me, and look in the corners and crevices, abscissas and junctions of light for some new companionship, some new conversation. There is this utter sameness, of course, but there is also the illusion of difference; between these possibilities, of course, we must exist as best we can. "If you'll excuse me," I say, "I'll be back in a little while —"

"Wait," Tom says, "I haven't clarified —" But of course he has; he has clarified everything. We exist in terms of unsparing, if only partial, clarification, as I would like to point out to him if it were not all too much trouble; and I lurch away from the handle, cutting a small swath for myself through the anomalous and seeking crowd. There are more, more of them than one could possibly imagine at an easy glance, and still coming in all the time — but still, with the debatable exception of the author of *Colour Out of Space*, whom I had hardly expected to see here,

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there is not a science fiction writer. Perhaps not even a magical realist. I think at times that this may be part of my punishment, may be the seal to my peculiar and diffident fate; but then again, this may not be the case, and I have misapprehended its totality. One wavers; one always wavers — there are poles of possibility here, and somewhere in that center, we must live.

It is worth retiring to think about; it is worth long and solitary walks along the back rim of this sullen and clangorous enclosure where questions give way only to the sound of those voices — but before I can reach the swinging doors that will carry me past Ernest and to that roadway which I (the perceptive, the far-ranging, the outward-seeking science fiction writer) may have been the only one to find, I am straightened by the imprint of Mary Flannery's small and determined fist in my chest; and then I find myself scrambling against a wall, held by the rigorous, unblinking purchase of her gaze. I know that this must not be the first time she has so accosted me — we have all been here for much longer than we would like to admit; memory carries through only imperfectly; each cycle is partially a new cycle — but surely I have never felt such determination in her grasp before. Rigor glints from her eye, rigorousness from the set of her jaw, Catholic grandeur and reparation from her spavined fingers. "It's not a myth," she says.

"I know that."

"It's not a metaphor; it's not an example; it's not a way of explaining things that is a simpler way of explaining other things. It's none of that at all. It is full and final; it is absolute."

"I know that, too." Really, what else is there to say? We must humor one another; if we do not admit one another's obsessions or selective agenda, we will have — well, what will we have? It is nothing to consider. "I accept that."

"You have to accept *everything*," Mary Flannery says dangerously. Her hand, holding me against the wall, has enormous strength and confidence; it is not lupus but the Holy Ghost that must accomplish this passage. "That's their mistake," she says, pointing with the other hand toward the enclosure where dimly now I can see Tom Wolfe and the acromegalic gent embracing one another with one arm, pouring drinks over each other's heads with their free hands. "They're trying to make it *real*, trying to call it *grace*. But it isn't even a prayer."

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"All right," I say. "I understand that." I write science fiction, or at least I think I used to before I came to this condition. If I don't know about the absence of prayer, the absence of conversion, then who does? But this is not a point that I dare make in these circumstances. "It's just a condition."

"Exactly," she says. "Working there in a shed, watching the peafowl, feeling the lupus move inside, turn me into a cross, make me the very nails that put me there, I thought of that. You can learn a lot being sick, you know. Nothing will teach you better than being sick, if you're a smart person."

"Or old," I say. "You can learn from being old."

"Not like being sick. Of course, sick *and* old is best for learning. *If* you're still smart. If you have your brain. Otherwise, it's just purgatory and purgatory and never knowledge. But you're not listening, are you? You're already gone from here. Your eyes are lit for a higher path; you are on your way out. I am an interruption, a distraction." Indeed, it is Flannery's eyes that seem alight with some grievous and perceptive demon; caught in that glance, I can feel myself slowly impaled by my own resistance. "It isn't that—"

"It's everything," she says. "That and the drinking, too—" And there is a thundering in the distance, a series of squawks and cries, as if not archangels but peafowl were massing; and then, in the sudden rolling and flickering light, I feel myself fall from Flannery's grasp. "Again," she says. "They're coming again." Ernest screams curses; there are a battery of curses coming from the enclosure. But I seem to be very much alone.

"Theatrics," Flannery says. "They don't trust us to find grace on our own; they have to give us flowers and trumpets." And indeed, there seems to be much more to say; that seems to be the point, flowers and trumpets — but before I can exchange assent with Flannery or be reminded that this, too, is not a symbol but merely evidence, the very roof of the establishment seems to depart, and I find myself along with the others, always the others, to be overcome by breezes and the cooler scents of night. Their enormous figures begin to materialize.

"Courage," Tom says. He has come by me most unostentatiously, no sense of passage; he is simply standing there. "Some of us will be lost, and others will be found, but in that final and everlasting morning, we will stand together—" He continues in this incantatory vein for a while as the figures, ever more substantial, mass before us — their huge arms and

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shoulders becoming definite in the mist, then their hats, their cloaks, their staffs, only their features indistinct, merely to be inferred from the hollows of their posture. "Forever in the light that arcs," Tom says. He throws a companionable hand around my shoulders. "If we are of good courage, we have nothing to fear," he says. "For here we stand."

And so we do. Here we stand. But waiting then, waiting in the difficult and faintly malodorous mist for their latest and most statutory judgment, the sense of their earlier judgments now coming over me through the chinks and crevices of partially recovered memory, I find myself trembling. "Are we standing firm?" Tom says. "Or did we lose the morning?"

"I have to tell the truth," I say hesitantly. "I must face them in truth."

"Yes," Tom says, "there is a certain purity in that." And I look at him, at his angular and honest features, seeing at last the honesty that must have always been there. I think of Mary Flannery's own advisement and the simpler declarations of the man from Providence, and it is in my throat, it is on my lips, it is to be spoken — "I am a science fiction writer! I am a science fiction writer!" I am about to shout, "I wrote it all my life, and even when I didn't write it, I was thinking about it; it's the only thing I ever did well, even though I did plenty of it badly!" I want to add, And so on and so forth, but before the words can burst forth, before this last and greatest of true confessions pours through, it is already too late; it is beyond me, for the cloaked figures have begun to speak, pound their staffs, render their undramatic and final judgment; and as their word goes forth, as their word pours from this time and place to any other time and place that may come, I can only quail against Tom and submit. And resubmit. Will there be release, or is it indeed of wandering and the earth again? "In the corner," I hear it said. *"In the corner—"*

In the corner—

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Orson Scott Card's latest books are FOLK OF THE FRINGE (Phantasia), which includes "The Fringe," a Hugo and Nebula nominated story that first appeared in F&SF; and the novel adaptation of THE ABYSS. "Lost Boys" is a rare new short story from Card, and as you will see, it is an unusual work, both intensely personal and dramatically compelling.

Lost Boys

By Orson Scott Card

I'VE WORRIED FOR a long time about whether to tell this story as fiction or fact. Telling it with made-up names would make it easier for some people to take. Easier for me, too. But to hide my own lost boy behind some phony made-up name would be like erasing him. So I'll tell it the way it happened, and to hell with whether it's easy for either of us.

Kristine and the kids and I moved to Greensboro on the first of March, 1983. I was happy enough about my job — I just wasn't sure I wanted a job at all. But the recession had the publishers all panicky, and nobody was coming up with advances large enough for me to take a decent amount of time writing a novel. I suppose I could whip out 75,000 words of junk fiction every month and publish them under a half dozen pseudonyms or something, but it seemed to Kristine and me that we'd do better in the long run if I got a job to ride out the recession. Besides, my Ph.D. was down the toilet. I'd been doing good work at Notre Dame, but when I had to take out a few weeks in the middle of a semester to finish *Hart's Hope*, the

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English Department was about as understanding as you'd expect from people who prefer their authors dead or domesticated. Can't feed your family? So sorry. You're a writer? Ah, but not one that anyone's written a scholarly essay about. So long, boy-oh!

So sure, I was excited about my job, but moving to Greensboro also meant that I had failed. I had no way of knowing that my career as a fiction writer wasn't over. Maybe I'd be editing and writing books about computers for the rest of my life. Maybe fiction was just a phase I had to go through before I got a *real* job.

Greensboro was a beautiful town, especially to a family from the western desert. So many trees that even in winter you could hardly tell there was a town at all. Kristine and I fell in love with it at once. There were local problems, of course — people bragged about Greensboro's crime rate and talked about racial tension and what-not — but we'd just come from a depressed northern industrial town with race riots in the high schools, so to us this was Eden. There were rumors that several child disappearances were linked to some serial kidnapper, but this was the era when they started putting pictures of missing children on milk cartons — those stories were in every town.

It was hard to find decent housing for a price we could afford. I had to borrow from the company against my future earnings just to make the move. We ended up in the ugliest house on Chinqua Drive. You know the house — the one with cheap wood siding in a neighborhood of brick, the one-level rambler surrounded by split-levels and two-stories. Old enough to be shabby, not old enough to be quaint. But it had a big fenced yard and enough bedrooms for all the kids and for my office, too — because we hadn't given up on my writing career, not yet, not completely.

The little kids — Geoffrey and Emily — thought the whole thing was really exciting, but Scotty, the oldest, he had a little trouble with it. He'd already had kindergarten and half of first grade at a really wonderful private school down the block from our house in South Bend. Now he was starting over in mid-year, losing all his friends. He had to ride a school bus with strangers. He resented the move from the start, and it didn't get better.

Of course, *I* wasn't the one who saw this. *I* was at work — and I very quickly learned that success at Compute! Books meant giving up a few little things like seeing your children. I had expected to edit books written

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by people who couldn't write. What astonished me was that I was editing books about computers written by people who couldn't *program*. Not all of them, of course, but enough that I spent far more time rewriting programs so they made sense — so they even *ran* — than I did fixing up people's language. I'd get to work at 8:30 or 9:00, then work straight through till 9:30 or 10:30 at night. My meals were Three Musketeers bars and potato chips from the machine in the employee lounge. My exercise was typing. I met deadlines, but I was putting on a pound a week and my muscles were all atrophying and I saw my kids only in the mornings as I left for work.

Except Scotty. Because he left on the school bus at 6:45 and I rarely dragged out of bed until 7:30, during the week I never saw Scotty at all.

The whole burden of the family had fallen on Kristine. During my years as a freelancer from 1978 till 1983, we'd got used to a certain pattern of life, based on the fact that Daddy was *home*. She could duck out and run some errands, leaving the kids, because I was home. If one of the kids was having discipline problems, I was there. Now if she had her hands full and needed something from the store; if the toilet clogged; if the xerox jammed, then she had to take care of it herself, somehow. She learned the joys of shopping with a cartful of kids. Add to this the fact that she was pregnant and sick half the time, and you can understand why sometimes I couldn't tell whether she was ready for sainthood or the funny farm.

The finer points of child-rearing just weren't within our reach at that time. She knew that Scotty wasn't adapting well at school, but what could she do? What could I do?

Scotty had never been the talker Geoffrey was — he spent a lot of time just keeping to himself. Now, though, it was getting extreme. He would answer in monosyllables, or not at all. Sullen. As if he were angry, and yet if he was, he didn't know it or wouldn't admit it. He'd get home, scribble out his homework (did they give homework when *I* was in first grade?), and then just mope around.

If he had done more reading, or even watched TV, then we wouldn't have worried so much. His little brother Geoffrey was already a compulsive reader at age five, and Scotty used to be. But now Scotty'd pick up a book and set it down again without reading it. He didn't even follow his mom around the house or anything. She'd see him sitting in the family room, go in and change the sheets on the beds, put away a load of clean

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clothes, and then come back in and find him sitting in the same place, his eyes open, staring at *nothing*.

I tried talking to him. Just the conversation you'd expect:

"Scotty, we know you didn't want to move. We had no choice."

"Sure. That's O.K."

"You'll make new friends in due time."

"I know."

"Aren't you ever happy here?"

"I'm O.K."

Yeah, right.

But we didn't have *time* to fix things up, don't you see? Maybe if we'd imagined this was the last year of Scotty's life, we'd have done more to right things, even if it meant losing the job. But you never know that sort of thing. You always find out when it's too late to change anything.

And when the school year ended, things *did* get better for a while.

For one thing, I saw Scotty in the mornings. For another thing, he didn't have to go to school with a bunch of kids who were either rotten to him or ignored him. And he didn't mope around the house all the time. Now he moped around outside.

At first Kristine thought he was playing with our other kids, the way he used to before school divided them. But gradually she began to realize that Geoffrey and Emily always played together, and Scotty almost never played with them. She'd see the younger kids with their squirtguns or running through the sprinklers or chasing the wild rabbit who lived in the neighborhood, but Scotty was never with them. Instead, he'd be poking a twig into the tent-fly webs on the trees, or digging around at the open skirting around the bottom of the house that kept animals out of the crawl space. Once or twice a week he'd come in so dirty that Kristine had to heave him into the tub, but it didn't reassure her that Scotty was acting normally.

ON JULY 28th, Kristine went to the hospital and gave birth to our fourth child. Charlie Ben was born having a seizure, and stayed in intensive care for the first weeks of his life as the doctors probed and poked and finally figured out that they didn't know what was wrong. It was several months later that somebody uttered the words "cerebral palsy," but our lives had already been transformed by then.

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Our whole focus was on the child in the greatest need — that's what you *do*, or so we thought. But how do you measure a child's need? How do you compare those needs and decide who deserves the most?

When we finally came up for air, we discovered that Scotty had made some friends. Kristine would be nursing Charlie Ben, and Scotty'd come in from outside and talk about how he'd been playing army with Nicky or how he and the guys had played pirate. At first she thought they were neighborhood kids, but then one day when he talked about building a fort in the grass (I didn't get many chances to mow), she happened to remember that she'd seen him building that fort all by himself. Then she got suspicious and started asking questions. Nicky who? I don't know, Mom. Just Nicky. Where does he live? Around. I don't know. Under the house.

In other words, imaginary friends.

How long had he known them? Nicky was the first, but now there were eight names — Nicky, Van, Roddy, Peter, Steve, Howard, Rusty, and David. Kristine and I had never heard of anybody having more than one imaginary friend.

"The kid's going to be more successful as a writer than I am," I said. "Coming up with eight fantasies in the same series."

Kristine didn't think it was funny. "He's so *lonely*, Scott," she said. "I'm worried that he might go over the edge."

It *was* scary. But if he was going crazy, what then? We even tried taking him to a clinic, though I had no faith at all in psychologists. Their fictional explanations of human behavior seemed pretty lame, and their cure rate was a joke — a plumber or barber who performed at the same level as a psychotherapist would be out of business in a month. I took time off work to drive Scotty to the clinic every week during August, but Scotty didn't like it and the therapist told us nothing more than what we already knew — that Scotty was lonely and morose and a little bit resentful and a little bit afraid. The only difference was that she had fancier names for it. We were getting a vocabulary lesson when we needed help. The only thing that seemed to be helping was the therapy we came up with ourselves that summer. So we didn't make another appointment.

Our homegrown therapy consisted of keeping him from going outside. It happened that our landlord's father, who had lived in our house right before us, was painting the house that week, so that gave us an excuse. And I brought home a bunch of videogames, ostensibly to review them for

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Compute!, but primarily to try to get Scotty involved in something that would turn his imagination away from these imaginary friends.

It worked. Sort of. He didn't complain about not going outside (but then, he never complained about anything), and he played the videogames for hours a day. Kristine wasn't sure she loved *that*, but it was an improvement — or so we thought.

Once again, we were distracted and didn't pay much attention to Scotty for a while. We were having insect problems. One night Kristine's screaming woke me up. Now, you've got to realize that when Kristine screams, that means everything's pretty much O.K. When something really terrible is going on, she gets cool and quiet and *handles* it. But when it's a little spider or a huge moth or a stain on a blouse, then she screams. I expected her to come back into the bedroom and tell me about this monstrous insect she had to hammer to death in the bathroom.

Only this time, she didn't stop screaming. So I got up to see what was going on. She heard me coming — I was up to 230 pounds by now, so I sounded like Custer's whole cavalry — and she called out, "Put your shoes on first!"

I turned on the light in the hall. It was hopping with crickets. I went back into my room and put on my shoes.

After enough crickets have bounced off your naked legs and squirmed around in your hands you stop wanting to puke — you just scoop them up and stuff them into a garbage bag. Later you can scrub yourself for six hours before you feel clean and have nightmares about little legs tickling you. But at the time your mind goes numb and you just do the job.

The infestation was coming out of the closet in the boys' room, where Scotty had the top bunk and Geoffrey slept on the bottom. There were a couple of crickets in Geoff's bed, but he didn't wake up even as we changed his top sheet and shook out his blanket. Nobody but us even saw the crickets. We found the crack in the back of the closet, sprayed Black Flag into it, and then stuffed it with an old sheet we were using for rags.

Then we showered, making jokes about how we could have used some seagulls to eat up our invasion of crickets, like the Mormon pioneers got in Salt Lake. Then we went back to sleep.

It wasn't just crickets, though. That morning in the kitchen Kristine called me again: There were dead June bugs about three inches deep in the window over the sink, all down at the bottom of the space between the

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regular glass and the storm window. I opened the window to vacuum them out, and the bug corpses spilled all over the kitchen counter. Each bug made a nasty little rattling sound as it went down the tube toward the vacuum filter.

The next day the window was three inches deep again, and the day after. Then it tapered off. Hot fun in the summertime.

We called the landlord to ask whether he'd help us pay for an exterminator. His answer was to send his father over with bug spray, which he pumped into the crawl space under the house with such gusto that we had to flee the house and drive around all that Saturday until a late afternoon thunderstorm blew away the stench or drowned it enough that we could stand to come back.

Anyway, what with that and Charlie's continuing problems, Kristine didn't notice what was happening with the videogames at all. It was on a Sunday afternoon that I happened to be in the kitchen, drinking a Diet Coke, and heard Scotty laughing out loud in the family room.

That was such a rare sound in our house that I went and stood in the door to the family room, watching him play. It was a great little videogame with terrific animation: Children in a sailing ship, battling pirates who kept trying to board, and shooting down giant birds that tried to nibble away the sail. It didn't look as mechanical as the usual videogame, and one feature I really liked was the fact that the player wasn't alone — there were other computer-controlled children helping the player's figure to defeat the enemy.

"Come on, Sandy!" Scotty said. "Come on!" Whereupon one of the children on the screen stabbed the pirate leader through the heart, and the pirates fled.

I couldn't wait to see what scenario this game would move to then, but at that point Kristine called me to come and help her with Charlie. When I got back, Scotty was gone, and Geoffrey and Emily had a different game in the Atari.

Maybe it was that day, maybe later, that I asked Scotty what was the name of that game about children on a pirate ship. "It was just a game, Dad," he said.

"It's got to have a name."

"I don't know."

"How do you find the disk to put it in the machine?"

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"I don't know." And he sat there staring past me and I gave up.

Summer ended. Scotty went back to school. Geoffrey started kindergarten, so they rode the bus together. Most important, things settled down with the newborn, Charlie — there wasn't a cure for cerebral palsy, but at least we knew the bounds of his condition. He wouldn't get *worse*, for instance. He also wouldn't get well. Maybe he'd talk and walk someday, and maybe he wouldn't. Our job was just to stimulate him enough that if it turned out he wasn't retarded, his mind would develop even though his body was so drastically limited. It was do-able. The fear was gone, and we could breathe again.

Then, in mid-October, my agent called to tell me that she'd pitched my Alvin Maker series to Tom Doherty at TOR Books, and Tom was offering enough of an advance that we could live. That plus the new contract for *Ender's Game*, and I realized that for us, at least, the recession was over. For a couple of weeks I stayed on at Compute! Books, primarily because I had so many projects going that I couldn't just leave them in the lurch. But then I looked at what the job was doing to my family and to my body, and I realized the price was too high. I gave two weeks' notice, figuring to wrap up the projects that only I knew about. In true paranoid fashion, they refused to accept the two weeks — they had me clean my desk out that afternoon. It left a bitter taste, to have them act so churlishly, but what the heck. I was free. I was home.

You could almost feel the relief. Geoffrey and Emily went right back to normal; I actually got acquainted with Charlie Ben; Christmas was coming (I start playing Christmas music when the leaves turn) and all was right with the world. Except Scotty. Always except Scotty.

It was then that I discovered a few things that I simply hadn't known. Scotty never played any of the videogames I'd brought home from *Compute!* I knew that because when I gave the games back, Geoff and Em complained bitterly — but Scotty didn't even know what the missing games *were*. Most important, that game about kids in a pirate ship wasn't there. Not in the games I took back, and not in the games that belonged to us. Yet Scotty was still playing it.

He was playing one night before he went to bed. I'd been working on *Ender's Game* all day, trying to finish it before Christmas. I came out of my office about the third time I heard Kristine say, "Scotty, go to bed *now!*"

For some reason, without yelling at the kids or beating them or any-

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thing, I've always been able to get them to obey when Kristine couldn't even get them to acknowledge her existence. Something about a fairly deep male voice — for instance, I could always sing insomniac Geoffrey to sleep as an infant when Kristine couldn't. So when I stood in the doorway and said, "Scotty, I think your mother asked you to go to bed," it was no surprise that he immediately reached up to turn off the computer.

"*I'll* turn it off," I said. "Go!"

He still reached for the switch.

"Go!" I said, using my deepest voice-of-God tones.

He got up and went, not looking at me.

I walked to the computer to turn it off, and saw the animated children, just like the ones I'd seen before. Only they weren't on a pirate ship, they were on an old steam locomotive that was speeding along a track. What a game, I thought. The single-sided Atari disks don't even hold a 100K, and here they've got two complete scenarios and all this animation and —

And there wasn't a disk in the disk drive.

That meant it was a game that you upload and then remove the disk, which meant it was completely RAM resident, which meant all this quality animation fit into a mere 48K. I knew enough about game programming to regard that as something of a miracle.

I looked around for the disk. There wasn't one. So Scotty had put it away, thought I. Only I looked and looked and couldn't find any disk that I didn't already know.

I sat down to play the game — but now the children were gone. It was just a train. Just speeding along. And the elaborate background was gone. It was the plain blue screen behind the train. No tracks, either. And then no train. It just went blank, back to the ordinary blue. I touched the keyboard. The letters I typed appeared on the screen. It took a few carriage returns to realize what was happening — the Atari was in memo-pad mode. At first I thought it was a pretty terrific copy-protection scheme, to end the game by putting you into a mode where you couldn't access memory, couldn't do anything without turning off the machine, thus erasing the program code from RAM. But then I realized that a company that could produce a game so good, with such tight code, would surely have some kind of sign-off when the game ended. And why did it end? Scotty hadn't touched the computer after I told him to stop. I didn't touch it, either. Why did the children leave the screen? Why did the train disappear?

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It never occurred to her that there was anything weird about Scotty's game.

There was no way the computer could "know" that Scotty was through playing, especially since the game *had* gone on for a while after he walked away.

Still, I didn't mention it to Kristine, not till after everything was over. She didn't know anything about computers then except how to boot up and get WordStar on the Altos. It never occurred to her that there was anything weird about Scotty's game.

It was two weeks before Christmas when the insects came again. And they shouldn't have — it was too cold outside for them to be alive. The only thing we could figure was that the crawl space under our house stayed warmer or something. Anyway, we had another exciting night of cricket-bagging. The old sheet was still wadded up in the crack in the closet — they were coming from under the bathroom cabinet this time. And the next day it was daddy-long-legs spiders in the bathtub instead of June bugs in the kitchen window.

"Just don't tell the landlord," I told Kristine. "I couldn't stand another day of that pesticide."

"It's probably the landlord's father *causing* it," Kristine told me. "Remember he was here painting when it happened the first time? And today he came and put up the Christmas lights."

We just lay there in bed chuckling over the absurdity of that notion. We had thought it was silly but kind of sweet to have the landlord's father insist on putting up Christmas lights for us in the first place. Scotty went out and watched him the whole time. It was the first time he'd ever seen lights put up along the edge of the roof — I have enough of a case of acrophobia that you couldn't get me on a ladder high enough to do the job, so our house always went undecorated except the tree lights you could see through the window. Still, Kristine and I are both suckers for Christmas kitsch. Heck, we even play the Carpenters' Christmas album. So we thought it was great that the landlord's father wanted to do that for us. "It was my house for so many years," he said. "My wife and I always had them. I don't think this house'd look *right* without lights."

He was such a nice old coot anyway. Slow, but still strong, a good

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steady worker. The lights were up in a couple of hours.

Christmas shopping. Doing Christmas cards. All that stuff. We were busy.

Then one morning, only about a week before Christmas, I guess, Kristine was reading the morning paper and she suddenly got all icy and calm — the way she does when something *really* bad is happening. "Scott, read this," she said.

"Just *tell* me," I said.

"This is an article about missing children in Greensboro."

I glanced at the headline: CHILDREN WHO WON'T BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS. "I don't want to hear about it," I said. I can't read stories about child abuse or kidnappings. They make me crazy. I can't sleep afterward. It's always been that way.

"You've got to," she said. "Here are the names of the little boys who've been reported missing in the last three years. Russell DeVerge, Nicholas Tyler —"

"What are you getting at?"

"Nicky. Rusty. David. Roddy. Peter. Are these names ringing a bell with you?"

I usually don't remember names very well. "No."

"Steve, Howard, Van. The only one that doesn't fit is the last one; Alexander Booth. He disappeared this summer."

For some reason the way Kristine was telling me this was making me very upset. *She* was so agitated about it, and she wouldn't get to the point. "So *what?*" I demanded.

"Scotty's imaginary friends," she said.

"Come on," I said. But she went over them with me — she had written down all the names of his imaginary friends in our journal, back when the therapist asked us to keep a record of his behavior. The names matched up, or seemed to.

"Scotty must have read an earlier article," I said. "It must have made an impression on him. He's always been an empathetic kid. Maybe he started identifying with them because he felt — I don't know, like maybe he'd been abducted from South Bend and carried off to Greensboro." It sounded really plausible for a moment there — the same moment of plausibility that psychologists live on.

Kristine wasn't impressed. "This article says that it's the first time

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anybody's put all the names together in one place."

"Hype. Yellow journalism."

"Scott, he got *all* the names right."

"Except one."

"I'm so relieved."

But I wasn't. Because right then I remembered how I'd heard him talking during the pirate videogame. Come on Sandy. I told Kristine. Alexander, Sandy. It was as good a fit as Russell and Rusty. He hadn't matched a mere eight out of nine. He'd matched them all.

You can't put a name to all the fears a parent feels, but I can tell you that I've never felt any terror for myself that compares to the feeling you have when you watch your two-year-old run toward the street, or see your baby go into a seizure, or realize that somehow there's a connection between kidnappings and your child. I've never been on a plane seized by terrorists or had a gun pointed to my head or fallen off a cliff, so maybe there are worse fears. But then, I've been in a spin on a snowy freeway, and I've clung to the handles of my airplane seat while the plane bounced up and down in mid-air, and still those weren't like what I felt then, reading the whole article. Kids who just disappeared. Nobody saw anybody pick up the kids. Nobody saw anybody lurking around their houses. The kids just didn't come home from school, or played outside and never came in when they were called. Gone. And Scotty knew all their names. Scotty had played with them in his imagination. How did he knew who they were? Why did he fixate on these lost boys?

We watched him, that last week before Christmas. We saw how distant he was. How he shied away, never let us touch him, never stayed with a conversation. He was aware of Christmas, but he never asked for anything, didn't seem excited, didn't want to go shopping. He didn't even seem to sleep. I'd come in when I was heading for bed — at one or two in the morning, long after he'd climbed up into his bunk — and he'd be lying there, all his covers off, his eyes wide open. His insomnia was even worse than Geoffrey's. And during the day, all Scotty wanted to do was play with the computer or hang around outside in the cold. Kristine and I didn't know what to do. Had we already lost him somehow?

We tried to involve him with the family. He wouldn't go Christmas shopping with us. We'd tell him to stay inside while we were gone, and then we'd find him outside anyway. I even unplugged the computer and

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hid all the disks and cartridges, but it was only Geoffrey and Emily who suffered — I still came into the room and found Scotty playing his impossible game.

He didn't ask for anything until Christmas Eve.

Kristine came into my office, where I was writing the scene where Ender finds his way out of the Giant's Drink problem. Maybe I was so fascinated with computer games for children in that book because of what Scotty was going through — maybe I was just trying to pretend that computer games made sense. Anyway, I still know the very sentence that was interrupted when she spoke to me from the door. So very calm. So very frightened.

"Scotty wants us to invite some of his friends in for Christmas Eve," she said.

"Do we have to set extra places for imaginary friends?" I asked.

"They're aren't imaginary," she said. "They're in the back yard, waiting."

"You're kidding," I said. "It's *cold* out there. What kind of parents would let their kids go outside on Christmas Eve?"

She didn't say anything. I got up and we went to the back door together. I opened the door.

There were nine of them. Ranging in age, it looked like, from six to maybe ten. All boys. Some in shirt sleeves, some in coats, one in a swimsuit. I've got no memory for faces, but Kristine does. "They're the ones," she said softly, calmly, behind me. "That one's Van. I remembered him."

"Van?" I said.

He looked up at me. He took a timid step toward me.

I heard Scotty's voice behind me. "Can they come in, Dad? I told them you'd let them have Christmas Eve with us. That's what they miss the most."

I turned to him. "Scotty, these boys are all reported missing. Where have they been?"

"Under the house," he said.

I thought of the crawl space. I thought of how many times Scotty had come in covered with dirt last summer.

"How did they get there?" I asked.

"The old guy put them there," he said. "They said I shouldn't tell anybody or the old guy would get mad and they never wanted him to be mad at them again. Only I said it was O.K., I could tell *you*."

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"That's right," I said.

"The landlord's father," whispered Kristine.

I nodded.

"Only how could he keep them under there all this time? When does he feed them? When —"

She already knew that the old guy didn't feed them. I don't want you to think Kristine didn't guess that immediately. But it's the sort of thing you deny as long as you can, and even longer.

"They can come in," I told Scotty. I looked at Kristine. She nodded. I knew she would. You don't turn away lost children on Christmas Eve. Not even when they're dead.

Scotty smiled. What that meant to us — Scotty smiling. It had been so long. I don't think I really saw a smile like that since we moved to Greensboro. Then he called out to the boys. "It's O.K.! You can come in!"

Kristine held the door open, and I backed out of the way. They filed in, some of them smiling, some of them too shy to smile. "Go on into the living room," I said. Scotty led the way. Ushering them in, for all the world like a proud host in a magnificent new mansion. They sat around on the floor. There weren't many presents, just the ones from the kids; we don't put out the presents from the parents till the kids are asleep. But the tree was there, lighted, with all our homemade decorations on it — even the old needlepoint decorations that Kristine made while lying in bed with desperate morning sickness when she was pregnant with Scotty, even the little puff-ball animals we glued together for that first Christmas tree in Scotty's life. Decorations older than he was. And not just the tree — the whole room was decorated with red and green tassels and little wooden villages and a stuffed Santa hippo beside a wicker sleigh and a large chimney-sweep nutcracker and anything else we hadn't been able to resist buying or making over the years.

We called in Geoffrey and Emily, and Kristine brought in Charlie Ben and held him on her lap while I told the stories of the birth of Christ — the shepherds and the wise men, and the one from the Book of Mormon about a day and a night and a day without darkness. And then I went on and told what Jesus lived for. About forgiveness for all the bad things we do.

"Everything?" asked one of the boys.

It was Scotty who answered. "No!" he said. "Not killing."

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Kristine started to cry.

"That's right," I said. "In our church we believe that God doesn't forgive people who kill on purpose. And in the New Testament Jesus said that if anybody ever hurt a child, it would be better for him to tie a huge rock around his neck and jump into the sea and drown."

"Well, it *did* hurt, Daddy," said Scotty. "They never told me about that."

"It was a secret," said one of the boys. Nicky, Kristine says, because she remembers names and faces.

"You should have told me," said Scotty. "I wouldn't have let him touch me."

That was when we knew, really knew, that it was too late to save him, that Scotty, too , was already dead.

"I'm sorry, Mommy," said Scotty. "You told me not to play with them anymore, but they were my friends, and I wanted to be with them." He looked down at his lap. "I can't even cry anymore. I used it all up."

It was more than he'd said to us since we moved to Greensboro in March. Amid all the turmoil of emotions I was feeling, there was this bitterness: All this year, all our worries, all our efforts to reach him, and yet nothing brought him to speak to us except death.

But I realized now it wasn't death. It was the fact that when he knocked, we opened the door; that when he asked, we let him and his friends come into our house that night. He had trusted us, despite all the distance between us during that year, and we didn't disappoint him. It was trust that brought us one last Christmas Eve with our boy.

But we didn't try to make sense of things that night. They were children, and needed what children long for on a night like that. Kristine and I told them Christmas stories and we told about Christmas traditions we'd heard of in other countries and other times, and gradually they warmed up until every one of the boys told all about his own family's Christmases. They were good memories. They laughed, they jabbered, they joked. Even though it was the most terrible of Christmases, it was also the best Christmas of our lives, the one in which every scrap of memory is still precious to us, the perfect Christmas in which being together was the only gift that mattered. Even though Kristine and I don't talk about it directly now, we both remember it. And Geoffrey and Emily remember it, too. They call it "the Christmas when Scotty brought his friends." I don't think they ever really understood, and I'll be content if they never do.

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Finally, though, Geoffrey and Emily were both asleep. I carried each of them to bed as Kristine talked to the boys, asking them to help us. To wait in our living room until the police came, so they could help us stop the old guy who stole them away from their families and their futures. They did. Long enough for the investigating officers to get there and see them, long enough for them to hear the story Scotty told.

Long enough for them to notify the parents. They came at once, frightened because the police had dared not tell them more over the phone than this: that they were needed in a matter concerning their lost boy. They came: with eager, frightened eyes they stood on our doorstep, while a policeman tried to help them understand. Investigators were bringing ruined bodies out from under our house — there was no hope. And yet if they came inside, they would see that cruel Providence was also kind, and *this* time there would be what so many other parents had longed for but never had: a chance to say good-bye. I will tell you nothing of the scenes of joy and heartbreak inside our home that night — those belong to other families, not to us.

Once their families came, once the words were spoken and the tears were shed, once the muddy bodies were laid on canvas on our lawn and properly identified from the scraps of clothing, then they brought the old man in handcuffs. He had our landlord and a sleepy lawyer with him, but when he saw the bodies on the lawn he brokenly confessed, and they recorded his confession. None of the parents actually had to look at him; none of the boys had to face him again.

But they knew. They knew that it was over, that no more families would be torn apart as theirs — as ours — had been. And so the boys, one by one, disappeared. They were there, and then they weren't there. With that the other parents left us, quiet with grief and awe that such a thing was possible, that out of horror had come one last night of mercy and of justice, both at once.

Scotty was the last to go. We sat alone with him in our living room, though by the lights and talking we were aware of the police still doing their work outside. Kristine and I remember clearly all that was said, but what mattered most to us was at the very end.

"I'm sorry I was so mad all the time last summer," Scotty said. "I knew it wasn't really your fault about moving and it was bad for me to be so angry but I just was."

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For him to ask *our* forgiveness was more than we could bear. We were full of far deeper and more terrible regrets, we thought, as we poured out our remorse for all that we did or failed to do that might have saved his life. When we were spent and silent at last, he put it all in proportion for us. "That's O.K. I'm just glad that you're not mad at me." And then he was gone.

We moved out that morning before daylight; good friends took us in, and Geoffrey and Emily got to open the presents they had been looking forward to for so long. Kristine's and my parents all flew out from Utah and the people in our church joined us for the funeral. We gave no interviews to the press; neither did any of the other families. The police told only of the finding of the bodies and the confession. We didn't agree to it; it's as if everybody who knew the whole story also knew that it would be wrong to have it in headlines in the supermarket.

Things quieted down very quickly. Life went on. Most people don't even know we had a child before Geoffrey. It wasn't a secret. It was just too hard to tell. Yet, after all these years, I thought it *should* be told, if it could be done with dignity, and to people who might understand. Others should know how it's possible to find light shining even in the darkest place. How even as we learned of the most terrible grief of our lives, Kristine and I were able to rejoice in our last night with our firstborn son, and how together we gave a good Christmas to those lost boys, and they gave as much to us.

AFTERWORD

IN AUGUST 1988 I brought this story to the Sycamore Hill Writers Workshop. That draft of the story included a disclaimer at the end, a statement that the story was fiction, that Geoffrey is my oldest child and that no landlord of mine has ever done us harm. The reaction of the other writers at the workshop ranged from annoyance to fury.

Karen Fowler put it most succinctly when she said, as best I can remember her words, "By telling this story in first person with so much detail from your own life, you've appropriated something that doesn't belong to you. You've pretended to feel the grief of a parent who has lost a child, and you don't have a right to feel that grief."

When she said that, I agreed with her. While this story had been

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rattling around in my imagination for years, I had only put it so firmly in first person the autumn before, at a Halloween party with the students of Watauga College at Appalachian State. Everybody was trading ghost stories that night, and so on a whim I tried out this one; on a whim I made it highly personal, partly because by telling true details from my own life I spared myself the effort of inventing a character, partly because ghost stories are most powerful when the audience half-believes they might be true. It worked better than any tale I'd ever told out loud, and so when it came time to write it down, I wrote it the same way.

Now, though, Karen Fowler's words made me see it in a different moral light, and I resolved to change it forthwith. Yet the moment I thought of revising the story, of stripping away the details of my own life and replacing them with those of a made-up character, I felt a sick dread inside. Some part of my mind was rebelling against what Karen said. No, it was saying, she's wrong, you *do* have a right to tell this story, to claim this grief.

I knew at that moment what this story was *really* about, why it had been so important to me. It wasn't a simple ghost story at all; I hadn't written it just for fun. I should have known — I never write anything just for fun. This story wasn't about a fictional eldest child named "Scotty." It was about my real-life youngest child, Charlie Ben.

Charlie, who in the five and a half years of his life has never been able to speak a word to us. Charlie, who could not smile at us until he was a year old, who could not hug us until he was four, who still spends his days and nights in stillness, staying wherever we put him, able to wriggle but not to run, able to call out but not to speak, able to understand that he cannot do what his brother and sister do, but not to ask us why. In short, a child who is not dead and yet can barely taste life despite all our love and all our yearning.

Yet in all the years of Charlie's life, until that day at Sycamore Hill, I had never shed a single tear for him, never allowed myself to grieve. I had worn a mask of calm and acceptance so convincing that I had believed it myself. But the lies we live will always be confessed in the stories that we tell, and I am no exception. A story that I had fancied was a mere lark, a dalliance in the quaint old ghost-story tradition, was the most personal, painful story of my career — and, unconsciously, I had confessed as much by making it by far the most autobiographical of all my works.

Months later, I sat in a car in the snow at a cemetery in Utah, watching

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a man I dearly love as he stood, then knelt, then stood again at the grave of his eighteen-year-old daughter. I couldn't help but think of what Karen had said; truly I had no right to pretend that I was entitled to the awe and sympathy we give to those who have lost a child. And yet I knew that I couldn't leave this story untold, for that would also be a kind of lie. That was when I decided on this compromise: I would publish the story as I knew it had to be written, but then I would write this essay as an afterword, so that you would know exactly what was true and what was not true in it. Judge it as you will; this is the best that I know how to do.

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Here is a riveting story that begins in the battle scarred streets of Beirut and ends in the most surprising fashion. J. G. Ballard wrote a wonderful series of stories about a place called Vermilion Sands for F&SF in the 1960's. Since then he has been writing with distinction within the SF field and out of it. His most famous work is the autobiographical novel, EMPIRE OF THE SUN.

War Fever

By J.G. Ballard

RYAN'S DREAM OF a cease-fire first came to him during the battle for the Beirut Hilton. At the time he was scarcely aware of the strange vision of a city at peace that had slipped uninvited into a corner of his head. All day the battle had moved from from floor to floor of the ruined hotel, and Ryan had been too busy defending the barricade of restaurant tables in the mezzanine to think of anything else. By the end, when Arkady and Mikhail crept forward to silence the last Royalist sniper in the atrium, Ryan stood up and gave them covering fire, praying all the while for his sister Louisa, who was fighting in another unit of the Christian militia.

Then the firing ceased, and Captain Gomez signalled Ryan to make his way down the staircase to the reception area. Ryan watched the dust falling through the roof of the atrium fifteen floors above him. Illuminated by the sunlight, the pulverized cement formed a fleeting halo that cascaded toward the replica of a tropical island in the center of the atrium.

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The miniature lagoon was filled with rubble, but a few tamarinds and exotic ferns survived among the furniture thrown down from the upper balconies. For a moment this derelict paradise was lit by the dust, like a stage set miraculously preserved in the debris of a bombed theater. Ryan gazed at the fading halo, thinking that one day, perhaps, all the dust of Beirut would descend like the dove, and at last silence the guns.

But the halo served a more practical purpose. As Ryan followed Captain Gomez down the staircase he saw the two enemy militia men scrambling across the floor of the lagoon, their wet uniforms clearly visible against the chalky cement. Then he and Gomez were firing at the trapped soldiers, shredding the tamarinds into matchwood long after the two youths lay bloodily together in the shallow water. Possibly they had been trying to surrender, but the newsreels of Royalist atrocities shown on television the previous evening put paid to that hope. Like the other young fighters, Ryan killed with a will.

Even so, as after all the battles in Beirut that summer, Ryan felt dazed and numbed when it was over. He could almost believe that he too had died. The other members of his platoon were propping the five bodies against the reception counter, where they could be photographed for the propaganda leaflets to be scattered over the Royalist strongholds in south Beirut. Trying to focus his eyes, Ryan stared at the roof of the atrium, where the last wisps of dust were still falling from the steel girders.

"Ryan! What is it?" Dr. Edwards, the United Nations medical observer, took Ryan's arm and tried to steady him. "Did you see someone move up there?"

"No — there's nothing. I'm okay, doctor. There was a strange light....."

"Probably one of those new phosphorus shells the Royalists are using. A fiendish weapon, we're hoping to get them banned."

With a grimace of anger, Dr. Edwards put on his battered blue UN helmet. Ryan was glad to see this brave, if slightly naive man, in some ways more like an earnest young priest than a doctor, who spent as much time in the Beirut front line as any of the combatants. Dr. Edwards could easily have returned to his comfortable New England practice, but he chose to devote himself to the men and women dying in a forgotten civil war half a world away. The 17-year-old Ryan had struck up a close friendship with Dr. Edwards, and brought to him all his worries about his sister and aunt, and even his one-sided passion for Lieutenant Valentina, the

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strong-willed commander of the Christian guard-post at the telephone exchange.

Dr. Edwards was always caring and sympathetic, and Ryan often exploited the physician's good nature, milking him for advance news of any shift in military alliances which the UN peace keeping force had detected. Sometimes Ryan worried that Dr. Edwards had spent too long in Beirut. He had become curiously addicted to the violence and death, as if tending the wounded and the dying satisfied some defeatist strain in his character.

"Let's have a look at the poor devils." He led Ryan toward the soldiers propped against the reception counter, their weapons and personal letters arranged at their feet in a grim tableau. "With any luck, we'll find their next of kin."

Ryan pushed past Captain Gomez, who was muttering over his uncooperative camera. He knelt beside the youngest of the dead soldiers, a teenager with dark eyes and cherubic face, wearing the bulky camouflage jacket of the International Brigade.

"Angel. . . ? Angel Porrua. . . ?" Ryan touched the spongy cheeks of the 15-year-old Spaniard, with whom he often went swimming at the beaches of East Beirut. Only the previous Sunday they had rigged a makeshift sail on an abandoned dory and cruised half a mile up the coast before being turned back by the UN naval patrol. He realized that he had last seen Angel scrambling through the water-logged debris of the artificial lagoon in the atrium. Perhaps he had recognized Ryan on the mezzanine staircase, and had been trying to surrender as he and Captain Gomez opened fire.

"Ryan?" Dr. Edwards squatted beside him. "Do you know him?"

"Angel Porrua — but he's in the Brigade, doctor. They're on our side."

"Not any more." Clumsily, Dr. Edwards pressed Ryan's shoulder in a gesture of comfort. "Last night they did a deal with the Royalists. I'm sorry — they've been guilty of real treachery."

"No, Angel was on our side. . . ."

Ryan stood up and left the group of soldiers sharing a six-pack of beer. He stepped through the dust and rubble to the ornamental island in the center of the atrium. The bullet-riddled tamarinds still clung to their rockery, and Ryan hoped that they would survive until the first of the winter rains fell through the roof. He looked back at the Royalist dead, sitting like neglected guests who had expired at the reception counter of this hotel, weapons beside them.

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But what if the living were to lay down their weapons? Suppose that all over Beirut the rival soldiers were to place their rifles at their feet, along with their identity tags and the photographs of their sisters and sweethearts, each a modest shrine to a cease-fire?

A CEASE-FIRE? The phrase scarcely existed in Beirut's vocabulary, Ryan reflected, as he sat in the rear of Captain Gomez's jeep on the return to the Christian sector of the city. Around them stretched the endless vistas of shattered apartment houses and bombed-out office buildings. Many of the stores had been converted into strongpoints, their steel grilles plastered with slogans and posters, crude photographs of murdered women and children.

During the original civil war, thirty years earlier, more than half a million people had lived in Beirut. His own grandparents had been among them, some of the many Americans who had resigned their teaching posts at the schools and university to fight with the beleaguered Christian militia. From all over the world volunteers had been drawn to Beirut, mercenaries and idealists, religious fanatics and out-of-work bodyguards, who then fought and died for one or another of the rival factions.

Deep in their bunkers below the rubble they even managed to marry and raise their families. Ryan's parents had been in their teens when they were murdered during the notorious Airport Massacre — in one of the worst of many atrocities, the Nationalist militia had executed their prisoners after promising them safe passage to Cyprus. Only the kindness of an Indian soldier in the UN force had saved Ryan's life — he had found the baby boy and his sister in an abandoned apartment building, and then tracked down their adolescent aunt.

However tragic, Beirut had been worth fighting for, a living city with street markers, stores and restaurants. There were churches and mosques filled with real congregations, not heaps of roof-tiles under an open sky. Now the civilian population had gone, leaving a few thousand armed combatants and their families hiding in the ruins. They were fed and supplied by the UN peace keeping force, who turned a blind eye to the clandestine shipments of arms and ammunition, for fear of favoring one or another side in the conflict.

So a futile war dragged on, so pointless that the world's news media had long since lost interest. Sometimes, in a ruined basement, Ryan came

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across a tattered copy of *Time* or *Paris Match*, filled with photographs of street-fighting and graphic reports on the agony of Beirut, a city then at the center of the world's concern. Now no one cared, and only the hereditary militias fought on, grappling across their empires of rubble.

But there was nothing pointless about the bullets. As they passed the shell of the old pro-government radio station there was a single shot from the ground-floor window.

"Pull over, corporal! Get off the road!" Pistol in hand, Gomez wrenched the steering wheel from Arkady and slewed the jeep into the shelter of a derelict bus.

Kneeling beside the flattened rear tires, Ryan watched the UN spotter plane circle overhead. He waited for Gomez to flush out the sniper, probably a Nationalist fanatic trying to avenge the death of a brother or cousin. The Nationalist militia were based at Beirut Airport, a wilderness of weed-grown concrete on which no plane had landed for ten years, and rarely ventured into the center of the city.

If a cease-fire was ever to take hold it would be here, somewhere along the old Green Line that divided Beirut, in this no man's land between the main power bases — the Christians in northeast Beirut, the Nationalists and Fundamentalists to the south and west, the Royalists and Republicans in the southeast, with the International Brigade clinging to the fringes. But the real map of the city was endlessly redrawn by opportunist deals struck among the local commanders — a jeep bartered for a truckload of tomatoes, six rocket launchers for a video-recorder.

What ransom could buy a cease-fire?

"Wake up, Ryan! Let's move!" Gomez emerged from the radio station with his prisoner, a jittery 12-year-old in a hand-me-down Nationalist uniform. Gomez held the boy by his matted hair, then flung him into the back of the jeep. "Ryan, keep an eye on this animal — he bites. We'll take him to interrogation."

"Right, captain. And if there's anything left we'll trade him for some new videos."

Hands bound, the boy knelt on the floor of the jeep, weeping openly from fear and rage. Jabbing him with his rifle stock, Ryan was surprised by his own emotions. For all his hopes of a cease-fire, he felt a reflex of real hate for this overgrown child. Hate was what kept the war going. Even

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Dr. Edwards had been infected by it, and he wasn't alone. Ryan had seen the shining eyes of the UN observers as they photographed the latest atrocity victims, or debriefed the survivors of a cruel revenge attack, like prurient priests at confession. How could they put an end to the hate that was corrupting them all? Good God, he himself had begun to resent Angel Porrua for fighting with the Nationalists. . . .

That evening Ryan rested on the balcony of Aunt Vera's apartment overlooking the harbor in East Beirut. He watched the riding lights of the UN patrol craft out at sea, and thought about his plans for a cease-fire. Trying to forget the day's fighting and Angel's death, he listened to Louisa chattering in the kitchen over the sounds of pop music broadcast by a local radio station.

The balcony was virtually Ryan's bedroom — he slept there in a hammock shielded from public view by the washing line and the plywood hutch he had built as a boy for his Dutch rabbit. Ryan could easily have moved to any one of the dozen empty apartments in the building, but he liked the intimacy of family life. The two rooms and kitchen were the only home he had ever known.

A young couple in an apartment across the street had recently adopted an orphan boy, and the sounds of his crying reminded Ryan that he at least was related by blood to the members of his family. In Beirut such blood ties were rare. Few of the young women soldiers ever conceived, and most children were war-orphans, though it puzzled Ryan where all these youngsters came from — somehow a secret family life survived in the basements and shanty towns on the outskirts of the city.

"That's the Rentons' new little son." His sister strolled onto the balcony, brushing out the waist-long hair that spent its days in a military bun. "It's a pity he cries a lot."

"At least he laughs more than he cries." An intriguing thought occurred to Ryan. "Tell me, Louisa — will Lieutenant Valentina and I have a child?"

"A child? Did you hear that, Aunty? So what does Valentina think?"

"I've no idea. As it happens, I've never spoken to her."

"Well, dear, I think you should ask her. She might lose something of her elegant composure."

"Only for a few seconds. She's very regal."

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"It only takes a few seconds to conceive a child. Or is she so special that she won't even spare you those few seconds?"

"She is very special."

"Who's this?" Aunt Vera hung their combat jackets over the balcony, gazing at them with almost maternal pride. "Are you talking about me, Ryan, or your sister?"

"Someone far more special," Louisa rejoined. "His dream woman."

"You two are my dream women."

This was literally the truth. The possibility that anything might happen to them appalled Ryan. In the street below the balcony a night commando patrol had lined up and were checking their equipment — machine pistols, grenades, packs loaded with booby-traps and detonators. They would crawl into the darkness of west Beirut, each a killing machine out to murder some aunt or sister on a balcony.

A UN medical orderly moved down the line, issuing morphine ampoules. For all the lives they saved, Ryan sometimes resented the blue helmets. They nursed the wounded, gave cash and comfort to the bereaved, arranged foster-parents for the orphans, but they were too nervous of taking sides. They ringed the city, preventing anyone from entering or leaving, and in a sense controlled everything that went on in Beirut. They could virtually bring the war to a halt, but Dr. Edwards repeatedly told Ryan that any attempt by the peace keeping force to live up to its name would lead the world's powers to intervene militarily, for fear of destabilizing the whole Middle East. So the fighting went on.

The night-commando moved away, six soldiers on either side of the street, heading toward the intermittent clatter of gunfire.

"They're off now." Aunt Vera said. "Wish them luck."

"Why?" Ryan asked quietly. "What for?"

"What do you mean? You're always trying to shock us, Ryan. Don't you want them to come back?"

"Of course. But why leave in the first place? They could stay here."

"That's crazy talk." His sister placed a hand on Ryan's forehead, feeling for a temperature. "You had a hard time in the Hilton, Arkady told me. Remember what we're fighting for."

"I'm trying. Today I helped to kill Angel Porrua. What was he fighting for?"

"Are you serious? We're fighting for what we believe."

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"But nobody believes anything! Think about it, Louisa. The Royalists don't want the king, the Nationalists secretly hope for partition, the Republicans want to do a deal with the Crown Prince of Monaco, the Christians are mostly atheists, and the Fundamentalists can't agree on a single fundamental. We're fighting and dying for nothing."

"So?" Louisa pointed with her brush to the UN observers by their post. "That just leaves them. What do they believe in?"

"Peace. World harmony. An end to fighting everywhere."

"Then maybe you should join them."

"Yes. . . ." Ryan pushed aside his combat jacket and stared through the balcony railings. Each of the blue helmets was a pale lantern in the dusk. "Maybe we should all join the UN. Yes, Louisa, everyone should wear the blue helmet."

And so a dream was born.

DURING THE next days Ryan began to explore this simple but revolutionary idea. Though gripped by the notion, he knew that it was difficult to put into practice. His sister was skeptical, and the fellow-members of his platoon were merely baffled by the concept.

"I see what you're getting at," Arkady admitted as they shared a cigarette in the Green Line command bunker. "But if everyone joins the UN who will be left to do the fighting?"

"Arkady, that's the whole point. . . ." Ryan was tempted to give up. "Just think of it. Everything will be neat and clean again. There'll be no more patrols, no parades or weapons drills. We'll lie around in the MacDonalds eating hamburgers; there'll be discos every night. People will be walking around the streets, going into stores, sitting in cafes. . . ."

"That sounds really weird," Arkady commented.

'It isn't weird. Life will start again. It's how it used to be, like it is now in other places around the world."

"Where?"

"Well. . . ." This was a difficult one. Like the other fighters in Beirut, Ryan knew next to nothing about the outside world. No newspapers came in, and foreign TV and radio broadcasts were jammed by the signals teams of the rival groups to prevent any foreign connivance in a military coup. Ryan had spent a few years in the UN school in East Beirut, but his main

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source of information about the larger world came from the 40-year-old newsmagazines that he found in abandoned buildings. These presented a picture of a world at strife, of bitter fighting in Viet Nam, Angola and Iran. Presumably these vast conflicts, a greater version of the fighting in Beirut, were still going on.

Perhaps the whole world should wear the blue helmet? This thought excited Ryan. If he could bring about a cease-fire in Beirut the peace movement might spread to Asia and Africa, everyone would lay down their arms. . . .

Despite numerous rebuffs Ryan pressed on, arguing his case with any soldiers he met. Always there was an unvoiced interest, but one obstacle was the constant barrage of propaganda — the atrocity posters, the TV newsreels of vandalized churches that played on an ever-ready sense of religious outrage, and a medley of racial and anti-monarchist slanders.

To break this propaganda stranglehold was far beyond Ryan's powers, but by chance he found an unexpectedly potent weapon — humor.

While on duty with a shore patrol by the harbor, Ryan was describing his dream of a better Beirut as his unit passed the UN command post. The observers had left their helmets on the open-air map table, and without thinking Ryan pulled off his khaki forage cap and lowered the blue steel bowl over his head.

"Hey, look at Ryan!" Arkady shouted. There was some good-humored scuffling until Mikhail and Nazar pulled them apart. "No more wrestling now, we have our own peace keeping force!"

Friendly cat-calls greeted Ryan as he paraded up and down in the helmet, but then everyone fell silent. The helmet had a calming effect, Ryan noted, both on himself and his fellow soldiers. On an impulse he set off along the beach toward the Fundamentalist sentry-post five hundred yards away.

"Ryan — look out!" Mikhail ran after him, but stopped as Captain Gomez rode up in his jeep to the harbor wall. Together they watched as Ryan strode along the shore, ignoring the sniper-infested office buildings. He was halfway to the sentry-post when a Fundamentalist sergeant climbed onto the roof, waving a temporary safe-passage. Too cautious to risk his charmed life, Ryan saluted and turned back.

When he rejoined his platoon everyone gazed at him with renewed respect. Arkady and Nazar were wearing blue helmets, sheepishly ignoring

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Captain Gomez as he stepped in an ominous way from his jeep. Then Dr. Edwards emerged from the UN post, restraining Gomez.

"I'll take care of this, Captain. The UN won't press charges. I know Ryan wasn't playing the fool."

Explaining his project to Dr. Edwards was far easier than Ryan had hoped. They sat together in the observation post, as Dr. Edwards encouraged him to outline his plan.

"It's a remarkable idea, Ryan." Clearly gripped by its possibilities, Dr. Edwards seemed almost lightheaded. "I won't say it's going to work, but it deserves a try."

"The main object is the cease-fire," Ryan stressed. "Joining the UN force is just a means to that end."

"Of course. But do you think they'll wear the blue helmet?"

"A few will, but that's all we need. Little by little, more people will join up. Everyone is sick of fighting, doctor, but there's nothing else here."

"I know that, Ryan. God knows it's a desperate place." Dr. Edwards reached across the table and held Ryan's wrists, trying to lend him something of his own strength. "I'll have to take this up with the UN Secretariat in Damascus, so it's vital to get it right. Let's think of it as a volunteer UN force."

"Exactly. We'll volunteer to wear the blue helmet. That way we don't have to change sides or betray our own people. Eventually, everyone will be in the volunteer force. . . ."

". . . and the fighting will just fade away. It's a great idea, it's only strange that no one has ever thought of it before." Dr. Edwards was watching Ryan keenly. "Did anyone help you? One of the wounded ex-officers, perhaps?"

"There wasn't anyone, doctor. It just came to me, out of all the death. . . ."

Dr. Edwards left Beirut for a week, consulting his superiors in Damascus, but in that time events moved more quickly than Ryan had believed possible. Everywhere the militia fighters were sporting the blue helmet. This began as a joke confined to the Christian forces, in part an irreverent gesture at the UN observers. Then, while patrolling the Green Line, Ryan spotted the driver of a Royalist jeep wearing a blue beret. Soon the more carefree spirits, the pranksters in every unit, wore the helmet or beret like a cockade.

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"Ryan, look at this." Captain Gomez called him to the command post in the lobby of the TV station. "You've got a lot to answer for. . . ."

Across the street, near a burnt-out Mercedes, a Royalist guerrilla in a blue beret had set up a canvas chair and card table. He sat back, feet on the table, leisurely taking the sun.

"The nerve of it. . . ." Gomez raised Ryan's rifle and trained it at the soldier. He whistled to himself, and then handed the weapon back to Ryan. "He's lucky, we're over-exposed here. I'll give him his suntan. . . ."

This was a break-through, and not the last. Clearly there was a deep undercurrent of fatigue. By the day of Dr. Edwards' return, Ryan estimated that one in ten of the militia fighters was wearing the blue helmet or beret. Fire-fights still shook the night sky, but the bursts of gunfire seemed more isolated.

"Ryan, it's scarcely credible," Dr. Edwards told him when they met at the UN post near the harbor. He pointed to the map marked with a maze of boundary lines and fortified positions. "Today there hasn't been a single major incident along the Green Line. North of the airport there's even a de facto cease-fire between the Fundamentalists and the Nationalists."

Ryan was staring at the sea, where a party of Christian soldiers were swimming from a diving-raft. The UN guard-ships were close inshore, no longer worried about drawing fire. Without meaning to dwell on the past, Ryan said: "Angel and I went sailing there."

"And you'll go sailing again, with Nazar and Arkady." Dr. Edwards seized his shoulders. "Ryan, you've brought off a miracle!"

"Well. . . ." Ryan felt unsure of his own emotions, like someone who had just won the largest prize in a lottery. The UN truck parked in the sun was loaded with crates of blue uniforms, berets and helmets. Permission had been granted for the formation of a Volunteer UN Force recruited from the militias. The volunteers would serve in their own platoons, but be unarmed and take no part in any fighting, unless their lives were threatened. The prospect of a permanent peace was at last in sight.

ONLY SIX weeks after Ryan had first donned the blue helmet, an unbroken cease-fire reigned over Beirut. Everywhere the guns were silent. Sitting beside Captain Gomez as they toured the city by jeep, Ryan marvelled at the transformation. Unarmed soldiers lounged on the steps of the Hilton, groups of once-bitter enemies

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fraternized on the terrace of the Parliament building. Shutters were opening on the stores along the Green Line, and there was even a modest street market in the hallway of the Post Office. Children had emerged from their basement hideaways and played among the burnt-out cars. Many of the women guerrillas had exchanged their combat fatigues for bright print dresses, a first taste of the glamour and chic for which the city had once been renowned.

Even Lieutenant Valentina now stalked about in a black leather skirt and vivid lipstick jacket, blue beret worn rakishly over an elegant chignon.

As they passed her command post Captain Gomez stopped the jeep. He doffed his blue helmet in a gesture of respect. "My God! Isn't that the last word, Ryan?"

"It certainly is, Captain," Ryan agreed devoutly. "How do I even dare approach her?"

"What?" Gomez followed Ryan's awestruck gaze. "Not Lieutenant Valentina — she'll eat you for breakfast. I'm talking about the soccer match this afternoon."

He pointed to the large poster recently pasted over the cracked windows of the nearby Holiday Inn. A soccer match between the Republican and National teams would take place at 3 o'clock in the stadium, the first game in the newly formed Beirut Football League.

"'Tomorrow — Christians versus Fundamentalists. Referee: Colonel Mugabe of the International Brigade.' That should be high-scoring. . . ." Blue helmet in hand, Gomez climbed from the jeep and strolled over to the poster.

Ryan, meanwhile, was staring at Lieutenant Valentina. Out of uniform she seemed even more magnificent, her Uzi machine-pistol slung over her shoulder like a fashion accessory. Taking his courage in both hands, Ryan stepped into the street and walked toward her. She could eat him for breakfast, of course, and happily lunch and supper as well. . . .

The Lieutenant turned her imperious eyes in his direction, already resigned to the attentions of this shy young man. But before Ryan could speak, an immense explosion erupted from the street behind the TV station. The impact shook the ground and drummed against the pockmarked buildings. Fragments of masonry cascaded into the road as a cloud of smoke seethed into the sky, whipped upward by the flames that rose from

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the detonation point somewhere to the southwest of the Christian enclave.

A six-foot scimitar of plate glass fell from the window of the Holiday Inn, slicing through the football poster, and shattered around Gomez's feet. As he ran to the jeep, shouting at Ryan, there was a second explosion from the Fundamentalist sector of West Beirut. Signal flares were falling in clusters over the city, and the first sounds of gunfire competed with the whine of klaxons and the loudspeakers broadcasting a call to arms.

Ryan stumbled to his feet, brushing the dust from his combat jacket. Lieutenant Valentina had vanished into the strongpoint, where her men were already sighting the machine-gun in the barbette.

"Captain Gomez. . . . The bomb? What set it off?"

"Treachery, Ryan — the Royalists must have done a deal with the Nats." He pulled Ryan into the jeep, cuffing him over the head. "All this talk of peace. The oldest trap in the world, and we walked straight into it. . . ."

More than treachery, however, had taken place. Armed militiamen filled the streets, taking up their positions in the blockhouses and strongpoints. Everyone was shouting at once, voices drowned by the gunfire that came from all directions. Powerful bombs had been cunningly planted to cause maximum confusion, and the nervous younger soldiers were firing into the air to keep up their courage. Signal flares were falling over the city in calculated but mysterious patterns. Everywhere blue helmets and berets were lying discarded in the gutter.

When Ryan reached his aunt's apartment he found Dr. Edwards and two UN guards waiting for him.

"Ryan, it's too late. I'm sorry."

Ryan tried to step past to the staircase, but Dr. Edwards held his arms. Looking up at this anxious and exhausted man, Ryan realized that apart from the UN observers he was probably the only one in Beirut still wearing the blue helmet.

"Dr. Edwards, I have to look after Louisa and my aunt. They're upstairs."

"No, Ryan. They're not here any longer. I'm afraid they've gone."

"Where? My God, I told them to stay here!"

"They've been taken as hostages. There was a commando raid timed

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for the first explosion. Before we realized it, they were in and out."

"Who?" Confused and frightened, Ryan stared wildly at the street, where armed men were forming into their platoons. "Was it the Royalists, or the Nats?"

"We don't know. It's tragic, already there have been some foul atrocities. But they won't harm Louisa or your aunt. They know who you are."

"They took them because of *me*. . . ." Ryan lifted the helmet from his head. He stared at the blue bowl, which he had carefully polished, trying to make it the brightest in Beirut.

"What do you plan to do, Ryan?" Dr. Edwards took the helmet from his hands, a stage prop no longer needed after the last curtain. "It's your decision. If you want to go back to your unit, we'll understand."

Behind Dr. Edwards one of the observers held Ryan's rifle and webbing. The sight of the weapon and its steel-tipped bullets brought back Ryan's old anger, that vague hatred that had kept them all going for so many years. He needed to go out into the streets, track down the kidnappers, revenge himself on those who had threatened his aunt and Louisa.

"Well, Ryan. . . ." Dr. Edwards was watching him in a curiously distant way, as if Ryan was a laboratory rat at a signficant junction in a maze. "Are you going to fight?"

"Yes, I'll fight. . . ." Ryan placed the blue helmet firmly on his head. "But not for war. I'll work for another cease-fire, doctor."

It was then that he found himself facing the raised barrel of his own rifle. An expressionless Dr. Edwards took his wrists, but it was some minutes before Ryan realized that he had been handcuffed and placed under arrest.

For an hour they drove southeast through the suburbs of Beirut, past the derelict factories and shanty towns, stopping at the UN checkpoints along the route. From his seat in the back of the armored van, Ryan could see the ruined skyline of the city. Funnels of smoke leaned across the sky, but the sound of gunfire had faded. Once they stopped to stretch their legs, but Dr. Edwards declined to talk to him. Ryan assumed that the physician suspected him of being involved with the conspirators who had broken the cease-fire. Perhaps Dr. Edwards imagined that the whole notion of cease-fire had been a devious scheme in which Ryan had exploited his contacts among the young. . . ?

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They passed through the second of the perimeter fences that enclosed the city, and soon after approached the gates of a military camp built beside a deserted sanatorium. A line of olive-green tents covered the spacious grounds. Arrays of radio-antennae and television dishes rose from the roof of the sanatorium, all facing northwest toward Beirut.

The van stopped at the largest of the tents, which appeared to house a hospital for wounded guerrillas. But within the cool green interior there was no sign of patients. Instead they were walking through a substantial arsenal. Rows of trestle tables were loaded with carbines and machine-guns, boxes of grenades and mortar bombs. A UN sergeant moved among this mountain of weaponry, marking items on a list like the owner of a gun store checking the day's orders.

Beyond the arsenal was an open area that resembled the news room of a television station. A busy staff of UN observers stood beneath a wall-map of Beirut, moving dozens of colored tapes and stars. These marked the latest positions in the battle for the city being screened on the TV monitors beside the map.

"You can leave us, corporal. I'll be in charge of him now." Dr. Edwards took the rifle and webbing from the UN guard, and beckoned Ryan into a canvas-walled office at the end of the tent. Plastic windows provided a clear view into an adjacent room, where two women clerks were rolling copies of a large poster through a printing press. The blown-up photograph of a Republican atrocity, it showed a group of murdered women who had been executed in a basement garage.

Staring at this gruesome image, Ryan guessed why Dr. Edwards still avoided his eyes.

"Dr. Edwards, I didn't know about the bomb this morning, or the surprise attack. Believe me—"

"I believe you, Ryan. Everything's fine, so try to relax." He spoke curtly, as if addressing a difficult patient. He laid the rifle on his desk, and released the handcuffs from Ryan's wrists. "You're out of Beirut for good now. As far as you're concerned, the cease-fire is permanent."

"But . . . what about my aunt and sister?"

"They've come to no harm. In fact, at this very moment they're being held at the UN post near the Football Stadium."

"Thank God. I don't know what went wrong. Everyone wanted the cease-fire. . . ." Ryan turned from the atrocity posters spilling endlessly

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through the slim hands of the UN clerks. Pinned to the canvas wall behind Dr. Edwards were scores of photographs of young men and women in their combat fatigues, caught unawares near the UN observation posts. In pride of place was a large photograph of Ryan himself. Assembled together, they resembled the inmates of a mental institution.

Two orderlies passed the doorway of the office, wheeling a trolley loaded with assault rifles.

"These weapons, doctor? Are they confiscated?"

"No — as it happens, they're factory-new. They're on their way to the battlefield."

"So there's more fighting going on outside Beirut. . . ." This news was enough to make Ryan despair. "The whole world's at war."

"No, Ryan. The whole world is at peace. Except for Beirut — that's where the weapons are going. They'll be smuggled into the city inside a cargo of oranges."

"Why? That's mad, doctor! The militias will get them!"

"That's the point, Ryan. We want them to have the weapons. And we want them to keep on fighting."

Ryan began to protest, but Dr. Edwards showed him firmly to the chair beside the desk.

"Don't worry, Ryan, I'll explain it all to you. Tell me first, though — have you ever heard of a disease called smallpox?"

"It was some sort of terrible fever. It doesn't exist any more."

"That's true — almost. Fifty years ago the World Health Organization launched a huge campaign to eliminate smallpox, one of the worst diseases mankind has ever known, a real killer that destroyed tens of millions of lives. There was a global program of vaccination, involving doctors and governments in every country. Together they finally wiped it from the face of the earth."

"I'm glad, doctor — if only we could do the same for war."

"Well, in a real sense we have, Ryan — almost. In the case of smallpox, people can now travel freely all over the world. The virus does survive in ancient graves and cemeteries, but if by some freak chance the disease appears again there are supplies of vaccine to protect people and stamp it out."

Dr. Edwards detached the magazine from Ryan's rifle and weighed it in his hands, showing an easy familiarity with the weapon that Ryan had

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never seen before. Aware of Ryan's surprise, he smiled wanly at the young man, like a headmaster still attached to a delinquent pupil.

"Left to itself, the smallpox virus is constantly mutating. We have to make sure that our supplies of vaccine are up-to-date. So WHO was careful never to completely abolish the disease. It deliberately allowed smallpox to flourish in a remote corner of a small third-world country, so that it could keep an eye on how the virus was evolving. Sadly, a few people went on dying, and are still dying to this day. But it's worth it for the rest of the world. That way we'll always be ready if there's an outbreak of the disease."

Ryan stared through the plastic windows at the wall map of Beirut and the TV monitors with their scenes of smoke and gunfire. The Hilton was burning again.

"And Beirut, doctor? Here you're keeping an eye on another virus?"

"That's right, Ryan. The virus of war. Or, if you like, the martial spirit. Not a physical virus, but a psychological one even more dangerous than smallpox. The world is at peace, Ryan. There hasn't been a war anywhere for thirty years — there are no armies or air forces, and all disputes are settled by negotiation and compromise, as they should be. No one would dream of going to war, any more than a sane mother would shoot her own children if she was cross with them. But we have to protect ourselves against the possibility of a mad strain emerging, against the chance that another Hitler or Pol Pot might appear."

"And you can do all that here?" Ryan scoffed. "In Beirut?"

"We think so. We have to see what makes people fight, what makes them hate each other enough to want to kill. We need to know how we can manipulate their emotions, how we can twist the news and trigger off their aggressive drives, how we can play on their religious feelings or political ideals. We even need to know how strong the desire for peace is."

"Strong enough. It can be strong, doctor."

"In your case, yes. You defeated us, Ryan. That's why we've pulled you out." Dr. Edwards spoke without regret, as if he envied Ryan his dogged dream. "It's a credit to you, but the experiment must go on, so that we can understand this terrifying virus."

"And the bombs this morning? The surprise attack?"

"We set off the bombs, though we were careful that no one was hurt. We supply all the weapons, and always have. We print up the propaganda

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material, we fake the atrocity photographs, so that the rival groups betray each other and change sides. It sounds like a grim version of musical chairs, and in a way it is."

"But all these years, doctor. . . ." Ryan was thinking of his old comrades-in-arms who had died beside him in the dusty rubble. Some had given their lives to help wounded friends. "Angle and Moshe, Aziz . . . hundreds of people dying!"

"Just as hundreds are still dying of smallpox. But thousands of millions are living — in peace. It's worth it, Ryan; we've learned so much since the UN rebuilt Beirut thirty years ago."

"They planned it all — the Hilton, the TV station, the MacDonalds. . . ?"

"Everything, even the MacDonalds. The UN architects designed it as a typical world city — a Hilton, a Holiday Inn, a sports stadium, shopping malls. They brought in orphaned teenagers from all over the world, from every race and nationality. To begin with we had to prime the pump — the NCOs and officers were all UN observers fighting in disguise. But once the engine began to turn, it ran with very little help."

"Just a few atrocity photographs. . . ." Ryan stood up and began to put on his webbing. Whatever he thought about Dr. Edwards, the reality of the civil war remained, the only logic that he recognized. "Doctor, I have to go back to Beirut."

"It's too late, Ryan. If we let you return, you'd endanger the whole experiment."

"No one will believe me, doctor. Anyway, I must find my sister and Aunt Vera."

"She isn't your sister, Ryan. Not your real sister. And Vera isn't your real aunt. They don't know, of course. They think you're all from the same family. Louisa was the daughter of two French explorers from Marseille who died in Antarctica. Vera was a foundling brought up by nuns in Montevideo."

"And what about. . . ?"

"You, Ryan? Your parents lived in Halifax, Nova Scotia. You were three months old when they were killed in a car crash. Sadly, there are some deaths we can't yet stop. . . ."

Dr. Edwards was frowning at the wall map of Beirut visible through the plastic window. A signals sergeant worked frantically at the huge display, pinning on clusters of incident flags. Everyone had gathered around the

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monitor screens. An officer waved urgently to Dr. Edwards, who stood up and left the office. Ryan stared at his hands while the two men conferred, and he scarcely heard the physician when he returned and searched for his helmet and side-arm.

"They've shot down the spotter plane. I'll have to leave you, Ryan — the fighting's getting out of control. The Royalists have overrun the Football Stadium and taken the UN post."

"The Stadium?" Ryan was on his feet, his rifle the only security he had known since leaving the city. "My sister and aunt are there! I'll come with you, doctor."

"Ryan . . . everything's starting to fall apart; we may have lit one fuse too many. Some of the militia units are shooting openly at the UN observers." Dr. Edwards stopped Ryan at the door. "I know you're concerned for them, you've lived with them all your life. But they're not —"

Ryan pushed him away. "Doctor, they *are* my aunt and sister."

IT WAS three hours later when they reached the Football Stadium. As the convoy of UN vehicles edged its way into the city, Ryan gazed at the pall of smoke that covered the ruined skyline. The dark mantle extended far out to sea, its underground surface lit by the flashes of high explosives as rival demolition squads moved through the streets. He sat behind Dr. Edwards in the second of the armored vans, but they could scarely hear themselves talk above the sounds of rocket and machine-gun fire.

By this stage Ryan knew that he and Dr. Edwards had little to say to each other. Ryan was thinking only of the hostages in the overrun UN post. His discovery that the civil war in Beirut was an elaborate experiment belonged to a numb area outside his mind, an emotional black hole from which no light or meaning could escape.

At last they stopped near the UN post at the harbor in East Beirut. Dr. Edwards sprinted to the radio shack, and Ryan unstrapped his blue helmet. In a sense he shared the blame for this uncontrolled explosion of violence. The rats in the war laboratory had been happy pulling a familiar set of levers — the triggers of their rifles and mortars — and being fed their daily pellet of hate. Ryan's dazed dream of peace, like an untested narcotic, had disoriented them and laid them open to a frenzy of hyperactive rage. . . .

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"Ryan, good news!" Dr. Edwards hammered on the windscreen, ordering the driver to move on. "Christian commandos have retaken the Stadium!"

"And my sister? And Aunt Vera?"

"I don't know. Hope for the best. At least the UN is back in action. With luck, everything will return to normal."

Later, as he stood in the somber storeroom below the concrete grandstand, Ryan reflected on this ominous word that Dr. Edwards had used. Normal. . . ? The lights of the photographers' flashes illuminated the bodies of the twenty hostages laid against the rear wall. Louisa and Aunt Vera rested between two UN observers, all executed by the Royalists before their retreat. The stepped concrete roof was splashed with blood, as if an invisible audience watching the destruction of the city from the comfort of the grandstand had begun to bleed into its seats. Yes, Ryan vowed, the world would bleed. . . .

The photographers withdrew, leaving Ryan alone with Louisa and his aunt. Soon their images would be scattered across the ruined streets, pasted to the blockhouse walls.

"Ryan, we ought to leave before there's a counterattack." Dr. Edwards stepped through the pale light. "I'm sorry about them — whatever else, they *were* your sister and aunt."

"Yes, they were. . . ."

"And at least they helped to prove something. We need to see how far human beings can be pushed." Dr. Edwards gestured helplessly at the bodies. "Sadly, all the way."

Ryan took off his blue helmet and placed it at his feet. He snapped back the rifle bolt and drove a steel-tipped round into the breech. He was only sorry that Dr. Edwards would lie beside Louisa and his aunt. Outside there was a momentary lull in the fighting, but it would resume. Within a few months he would unite the militias into a single force. Already Ryan was thinking of the world beyond Beirut, of that far larger laboratory waiting to be tested, with its millions of docile specimens unprepared for the most virulent virus of them all.

"Not all the way, doctor." He leveled the rifle at the physician's head. "All the way is the whole human race."

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 36: *In Which, Darkly and Deliciously, We Travel From Metropolis to Metropolis, Two Different Cities, Both Ominous*

LIKE QUITE another creature of the night, BATMAN (Warner Bros.) is a hoot!

It is the first multimillion megabuck "summer spectacular" blockbuster film—

—that traditionally mindless outpouring of saturation-hype movies intended as visual junk food for tots, teens, and the terminally sophomoric of all ages, during the summer months when they seek momentary surcease from such wearying and emotionally holocryptic activities as wet t-shirt contests, spraying graffiti, and downing brewskis till they belch'n'barf — fit fare for gongoozlers—

—the first E Ticket cinematic rollercoaster since *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*! that is worth every dollar of its admission ticket, worth every hour you will have to stand in line to see it. The first in several years that pays off more than even heightened expectations have promised.

It is masterful in every particular.

And if, like me, you are an admirer of that which is exemplary in comic strips and comic books . . . if, like me, you were weaned into the world of reading and the superimposed precontinuum of literature by that original American art-form called the comic book . . . if, like me, as a kid you adored Batman and, like me, recognize the Batman as one of the great fictional detectives, worthy of enshrinement with Nero Wolfe, Sherlock Holmes, Dick Tracy, Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, the Continental Op, Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, and Charlie Chan. . . .

Then you will revel in this extravagantly imaginative rendition of the Darknight Detective as cine-

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matic magic realism. Because the hundreds of men and women who created this film have pulled off what is only the second true, honorable, satisfying transmogrification of a funnybook creation in live-action motion picture terms. The first was *Superman* (1978).

But not even *Superman* could suck you in as totally as *Batman* does. The Metropolis of Clark Kent, Lex Luthor, *The Daily Planet* and The Man of Steel was only New York *avec* sight-gags. It worked nicely, and we all look on the movie with affection; but it was more-or-less mimetic reality with one or two fantastic elements dropped in. Like exotic slices of spicy Crèole andouille sausage in an otherwise s.o.p. gumbo.

The Gotham City of *Batman* is at least fifty percent of the success of this film. It is a designer's dream, a pedestrian's nightmare. It has the stunning, all-enthralling power of Giger's paintings for *Alien*, of Syd Mead and Lawrence Paull's Los Angeles as seen in *Blade Runner*, of William A. Horning's Wicked Witch of the West fortress in *The Wizard of Oz*. It is the most exuberantly extroverted elements of classic Art Deco melded with the grittiest aspects of the Casbah, Birmingham (the sooty one in England), Back O' The Yards in Chicago, Prague and Hell's Kitchen, by way of Quattermass's Hobbs Lane; and all of it subsumed into the vision of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. It is a city of fog, like London or Seattle every once in a while; it is a towering beast like Chernabog unfolding his leathery wings at the summit of Bald Mountain, his fecally-grimed buttocks hunkered in darkness at curbside; it is what lies just beyond what horrors we can see in any of Gustav Doré's engravings for Dante's *Divine Comedy*; it is concrete hell; urban paranoia personified; an evil rivet-studded poison mushroom of a megalopolis; something only Fritz Leiber could capture in narrative: the urban bad dream every *American Gothic* mom and dad shared of the corrupting city to which their innocent farmboy son was journeying for a factory job. It is Pleasure Island as all those bad little boys are mutated into screaming jackasses. It is perpetual midnight in Tiananmen Square, all killing shadows and bursts of cold light and dried blood. It is Johannesburg for whites; and if Goodness can survive there, it is only as a fitful, trembling cripple.

It is everything we read into fifty years of Batman stories, conceived in 1939 by Bob Kane and Bill Finger, embellished through the decades by Jerry Robinson, Neal Adams, Marshall Rogers, Alan Moore, and, most significantly for

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the heightened awareness of today's moviegoing audience, refurbished and made more dangerous than ever before by Frank Miller's 1986 "The Dark Knight Returns."

In this dreadful dungeon of a Gotham City, abhorrent abattoir erected without building codes, Red Hook interpreted as Dresden after the fire-bombing, the idea of a vigilante who dresses like a giant bat rings absolutely true. Not for an instant, from the first moment his liquid shadow slithers across a rooftop, till the final instant in which we see him poised against the night, would any but the catastrophically grown-up doubt that *this* Batman is precisely the sort of Naderesque Zorro that would find birth, sustenance and purpose in *this* Gotham.

Unlike Superman, the Batman has appealed to generations of hero-worshipping kids precisely because he is *not* superhuman. We always understood that he was merely a man, without the ability to leap buildings in a single bound, to outrace a crack streamliner, to move faster than a speeding bullet or to destroy evildoers with a blast of heat vision. Clark Kent was always a wimpy dweeb false identity of The Man of Steel. Kent was a put-on, a purposely inept red herring. But Batman is, and has always been, Bruce Wayne. Just a man. A consummate athlete, yes; a multimillionaire, yes; a philanthropist and playboy, yes: but always just as human as any of us. He can be beaten, he can be maimed, he can be killed.

But his obsession to fight crime, to go out every night, year after year, to avenge the senseless murder of his parents in Crime Alley, the murders he witnessed as a terrified child, was always a paradigm of vengeance that we understood as a dark otherside of human nature. He was, in those pre-*Death Wish* days, a symbol of balanced scales. We understood that it was a part of us that responded to the howls of the lynch mob, to the fears of city life that the NRA continues to feed, to a bloodlust that is despicable, *however* understandable. And in him, as symbol, we found catharsis.

All of that, without sermonizing, we get in *Batman*.

But more, much much more, we get an *artful* interpretation of that negativity in our souls. We get to see the violent Avenging Fury that bubbles up in us when we listen to the news and tremble at the terrors that infect our cities; and only the most deranged among us could fail to be turned away from that kind of vigilantism, even as we are captivated by his soul-crippling lust for justice, as opposed to the civilizing power of Law.

The balance is struck, in the smooth and literate screenplay of

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As Batman, Keaton performs as heroically as the most demanding fan could wish.

Sam Hamm and Warren Skaaren (rewritten, I am advised by numerous sources who wish to be unnamed, by the *Baron Munchausen* scenarist Charles McKeown), in the characterization of Bruce Wayne.

If the key to our willing suspension of disbelief is the persona of Gotham City — itself an active player in the superlative cast — then the codex for our acceptance of these images as having some relation to Real Life is the way in which Bruce Wayne has been written, and in the way he is played by Michael Keaton.

A year and a half ago, I was asked by *The Los Angeles Times* what I thought of the upcoming *Batman* film being directed by Tim Burton — he of *Beetlejuice* and *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* — and of Burton's seemingly-nepotic casting of Michael Keaton in the title role. That inquiry was precipitated by the deafening howls of outrage coming from the fans. Fans of the campy, counterproductive mid-Sixties crash-pow-zap television series; fans of previous comics-into-film disasters like *Supergirl, Swamp Thing, Captain America* and *Howard the Duck*; fans of the Batman canon as accreted through the years in comics.

The din was hysterical. How could they sign someone like Burton, whose work at Disney had been less than memorable, to shoulder in any serious way this most delicate production without descending into flummery and ridicule? How could Burton so cavalierly flout the requirements of Rambo-esque physicality necessary to presenting a "proper" Batman, by hiring a skinny comedian like Keaton? The fans *knew* it would be a disaster!

And I said to the *Times* (though later misquoted for purposes of yellow journalism by a nameless semi-pro journal minimally read in the world of comics fandom) that, after all, it was only a movie. The course of Western Civilization would not be deflected by a micromillimeter even if the film were the worst thing ever made. That the rights had, after all, been bought by Warner Bros. from people whose eyes were wide open, and they had the right to succeed or fail as they chose. I said, finally, that if I had any concern, it was that perhaps the selection of Keaton — strictly on the basis of his physique — seemed to me capricious, even though Keaton was certainly a boxoffice draw.

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Three minutes into the finished film, even that concern vanished. As Batman, Keaton performs as heroically as the most demanding fan could wish. He reifies the character. But as Bruce Wayne, he transcends. Keaton plays Bruce Wayne as if he were Robin as an adult. He is sweet, yet tormented; unassuming, yet a solid presence; everything that Batman is not, yet a human being of genuine passion. When Christopher Reeve played Clark Kent, he was always demonstrably acting. His Kent was a bumbler, a bit of a dolt, a thespic cul-de-sac we endured till he hit the nearest phone booth to change clothes.

But Bruce Wayne, as assayed by Keaton, is someone we would enjoy knowing. It is not hard to understand why Kim Basinger's Vicki Vale falls for him. He is a decent man whose secret agenda may have twisted him emotionally, even as his great wealth has bent him, but like the best in all of us he continually struggled to live that non-Batman part of his life as a rational, kindly human being.

It is an aspect of this film that no one in the lynch mob pre-release could have (or did) countenance. It makes everything else work.

(A side-bar: I'm not much one for lynch law, or the strident demands of the groundlings, but it's possible that the most important element in the success of *Batman* was the manipulation of the prattling of the fans for a year and a half. I am led to believe that the film as we see it is *exactly* what Tim Burton intended all along, and that early on he had to fight the demented input of studio executives* who continued to believe —

**From time to time, I am accused of using too-florid language, inflammatory verbiage as purple as the desert sands of the Kalahari 'neath a gibbous dragon's-eye moon. For those who would take me to task for referring to the pre-Burton attitude of Warner Bros. executives as "demented," I offer the following intelligence. The director originally slated to direct* Batman, *the one WB thought proper to encompass their vision of what a Batman movie should be was Ivan Reitman. Credits:* Foxy Lady *(1971),* Cannibal Girls *(1973),* Meatballs *(1979),* Stripes *(1981),* Ghostbusters *(1984),* Legal Eagles *(1986) and* Twins *(1988). Further credits: he produced* National Lampoon's Animal House, National Lampoon's Vacation *and* The Heavy Metal Movie. *Nothing, it seems to me, in those credits to allay the shakes of the fans who feared* Batman *would be filmed as a drunken, dopey comedy. And if casting Keaton seemed ill-advised, know that it was only because he was considered too young to play the role that Charlie Sheen didn't get it; know that Warners was seriously responding to Sylvester Stallone's desire to play Batman ("Yo! Robin boy!"); and know that WB's directorial choice, Mr. Reitman, cast in the lead roles . . . Bill Murray as Batman . . . Eddie Murphy as Robin. Don't talk to me about deranged. I said demented, and I* mean *demented!*

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in the face of facts — that what was needed was a movie that echoed the idiocy of the tv series. Much *pow*, some *zap*, and a lot of *whappola*! But Burton and the Warner Bros. publicity department took that firestorm of public outrage, and fed it back effectively into the "creative sessions," and the execs bowed to Burton's vision, and stayed out of his way, to their credit, and to the excellence of the finished product. In this case, perhaps for the first time in a way that had superb results, the fan audience caused a dream to be realized as they wished. It's just an observation, and I could be wrong; but at least the Warner Bros. pr *apparat* must be lauded for turning an angry rabble into a Designated Hitter that walloped a homer.]

Which brings us to the third major player in the cast. If Gotham City and Michael Keaton form two legs of the tripod of excellence on which *Batman* solidly stands, then Jack Nicholson as that madcap mountebank of mayhem, The Joker, is a third leg as muscular as Atlas.

Nicholson was *born* to play The Joker.

Everything in his professional career has led to this characterization. When the time for Oscars slinks toward us, it is hoped that the Academy will not — as it usually does — disregard this incredible performance because it does not appear in one of those heavy-breathing *muy serioso* films of artificial angst and motheaten social conscience. Nicholson's Joker, neé Jack Napier, is a chilling construct that makes Freddy Krueger, hockeymask-faced Jason Voorhees and *Halloween's* Michael Myers look as malevolent as Larry, Shemp and Moe. All of the psychotic mugging that crippled *The Shining*, *Heartburn* and other films in which Nicholson was permitted to run amuck, becomes (strangely!) just a subtext here. You would think this would be the arena in which all of that lunacy of Nicholson's would be set free, to splatter and dominate every scene in which he appears. But (oddly!) Nicholson seems to have understood in his bone-marrow that he had to use it as pentimento, the song only subtly heard beneath the orchestral theme. It is bloody frightening.

And as we seek balance between Good and Evil, between Responsibility and Carelessness, between Ethic and Amorality, we unconsciously require a balance between Hero and Villain. For a creature as powerful and frightening as Batman to face-off with punks and pushers and thugs would be to present a struggle that is flaccid and predictable. Superman must meet foes equally (at least) as godlike. It took

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a President, the U.S. Army, the power of television and a gentle but clever country lawyer to bring down Senator Joe McCarthy. Hitler took on the whole world. And it is meet that Batman faces The Joker.

It is one of the cinematic mano-a-mano duels that will live in the annals of knockdown dragout confrontation. I will not spoil the ending for you.

Additionally: Michael Gough as Bruce Wayne's faithful friend and butler, Alfred, is splendid. You will find it hard to keep memories of John Gielgud in *Arthur* from your view, but if it is not an entirely unseen rendition of the manservant as mordant Jeeves, it is nonetheless expert and correct and endearing. Jack Palance's cameo is lip-smackingly what we know this fine actor can do when he's reprising the role he created in *Shane* in 1953, though we have seen his cornucopial abilities in offbeat casting from *The Big Knife* to *Monte Walsh*. Basinger is just fine, and if one considers her performance as counterpoint to that of the vain and ultimately tragic Alicia, as played by Mick Jagger's girlfriend, model Jerry Hall, it becomes all the more freighted with support for the foreground jousting between Keaton and Nicholson. Pat Hingle as Commissioner Gordon, and Billy Dee Williams as D.A. Harvey Dent (pre-Two-Face), don't have a lot to do — we expect to see them filled out more richly in the second and third films — for which Williams has already signed the contracts — but what they're given, they handle with skill and professionalism. They could hardly do less in a film that makes no missteps. I was not impressed with Robert Wuhl as crime reporter Alexander Knox. For a character so omnipresent — if not actively pivotal — lines less bombastic and a player more charismatic might have better suited. But that ain't no cavil.

If you seek cavils, illogicities in the total film, they are there for the nit-pickers. Cops blasting away at chemical tanks clearly labeled TOXIC in an enclosed space is kinda dumb. The gratuitous sexism of Nicholson's Jack Napier, intended to make frat boys guffaw, might have been deleted. Having Batman blow up a deadly chemical plant in the middle of a crowded city, where the winds can blow death to the suburbs, merely for the sake of a spectacular special effect, defies rationality. Dropping fifty storeys on a Batarang wire without ripping one's arm out of the socket does tend to defy the laws of the physical universe. But . . .

Who the hell cares!

This is one of those films that defies criticism of such a sort. If one starts to say, "Well, the trajec-

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tory of that missile from the Batwing should have taken out The Joker as well as the float behind him," then one should stop and say, "This is a movie in which a guy dresses up like a bat, in which a guy falls into a steaming vat of toxic chemicals and lives, in which caves under a mansion house all sorts of vehicles and no one seems to notice it's there. . ." and you realize you're being a fool for letting commonsense get in the way of your enjoyment.

The bottom line as regards any sense of social conscience is this: you can go from first frame to last, and any connection between Serious Message and what we are given . . . is strictly accidental. But also on that bottom line labeled *purpose of film* is the pre-printed truth that this is an urban fairy tale, a darker-than-Grimm's fable intended to a) wow you with fantasy and b) make millions for the studio.

And there is no doubt in my mind that *Batman* will do precisely that. Had you been clever enough to buy Warner Communications stock last year, you would be looking at a tsunami ride today. The film cost thirty million to make (not counting prints and advertising), and the estimated take on just the licensing of Batman *tchotchkes* is well over $200 million. I expect that the June 23rd opening (as I write this) will outgross even the bloated boxoffice takes of the new *Indiana Jones* and *Star Trek* killers. For the next six months no one will be able to go out on the street without seeing someone wearing a Batman artifact.

Which is as it should be. For *Batman* sets a new standard in the making of superspectaculars. If you can remember back that far, consider what your expectations for BIG films were, right up to the moment you sat there waiting for the opening shot of *Star Wars*; and how your level of expectation for every film that followed, of *any* kind, was hurtled to a new pinnacle as those spaceships roared overhead. You were changed, and the film industry was changed. Not even *Fantasia* or *Pinocchio* had prepared us for the look, the feel, the sensory blowout of technical miracles in *Star Wars*.

And we held at that level, despite all the impressive films that came after, till *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. And, like junkies pumping the blood/dope mixture back again and again for a higher high, we were booted to a new plateau of technical wonderment. And we held there till *Roger Rabbit*; and we held there till *Baron Munchausen* by way of *Brazil*. And now, gasping for breath, our eyes no longer equipped to take it all in the first viewing, we are flung

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higher yet. *Batman* makes every James Bond film look like something shot by a talented film school student with a Camcorder on a weekend. (I warn: we may not be able to take many more of these narcotic fixes and still remember how rich and rewarding can be little films like, say, *Miracle Mile.*)

Yet even as stunningly reminiscent of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* as the design of the film may be, even as satisfying as are the lead performances by Keaton and Nicholson, even as breathtaking as are the special effects, it may well be the small moments in the film that stick with us longest. I hesitate to spoil even one second of your pleasure, but as I imagine you will all have seen the film by the time you read this, I must tell you of *my* favorite moment. If you don't want it revealed, skip the next paragraph.

It is 3:15 a.m. Vicki Vale has just had sex with Bruce Wayne. She wakens from deep sleep, alone there in the bedroom at Wayne Manor. The other side of the bed is empty. Groggily, she looks across the darkened room and there, backlit by the night sky, is Bruce Wayne, hanging upside-down on a grav-boot muscle toning rig, naked, flexing his shoulder muscles, slightly (ever so slightly) spreading his arms. Upside-down. Like a bat hanging from a cave ceiling. And she goes back to sleep.

I only *loved* that moment! It was a directorial touch, as opposed to something carefully scripted (even though it may have been in the screenplay), that indicated to me that Tim Burton was a wise choice for director. (Burton, I am told, directed very little of the main action sequences. The knockabout extravaganzas were ordered up, I am told, by Peter MacDonald, who directed *Rambo III.* And very well done they are, too; with an occasional sense of disorientation as to who is where, doing what to whom. But it is in the *non*-action sequences that the film comes most to mean something; and *that* is Burton.)

One final comment. In only three particulars does the film depart from the Accepted Canon of the comic book version(s) of Batman. One is the ending, which I will not comment on. The second is the absence of Robin, which doesn't bother me at all. Call it pre-Robin, if you will. And the third is in the portrayal of the murder of Bruce Wayne's parents. I cannot, without screwing it up for you, go into more detail than that. But I go on record here as championing that change. It makes the film an Apollonian-Dionysian whole, a snake-swallowing-its-tail configuration of poetic justice. And it is an *improvement* on the many-times-revamped

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origin of Batman.

To the end of addressing those changes, I respond to the alleged comment of scenarist Sam Hamm, who viewed these departures from cant by Charles McKeown as "vulgarities," as follows:

When one is dealing with a commercial property owned lock, stock and trademark by as ruthless and cynical a parent as DC Comics, a plantation-mentality taskmaster that offers readers the chance to kill or keep alive Robin by use of a 900 call-in number, that turns the characters over to one flash-in-the-pan writer or artist after another, to debase and corrupt as whim or ego dictates, it seems to me the height of mendacity to pillory *any* subcontractor for revisionism. The savaging of the Batman mythos every month at the hands of some DC wage slave, is far more offensive to me than the rational — if filmically self-serving — changes we encounter in the movie. I have considerable respect for Mr. Hamm's work on the film, and the writing he has recently done for DC, but I think his comment ill-advised.

And for those who shrieked in horror at the employment of Tim Burton and Michael Keaton — whose slight physique has been innovatively integrated into the reasons Bruce Wayne *became* the Batman, and dovetails with his use of body-armor, pulling the fangs of those who say Batman should *only* be an acrobat without gadgets — I suggest that *next* year, when they announce that the second film will be directed by someone else, starring someone else as Batman, that those will be the same howlers who'll babble that it would be un*think*able to employ anyone *but* Burton and Keaton.

But then, those will probably be the same ones who liked Prince's music in this first film. And what is there to be done with people like that?

Don't ask me. I just go to the movies.

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Robert Silverberg was the first writer we invited to this special issue, and his was the last story to come in, proving only that he's a busy man who always honors his commitments. His stories for F&SF include the memorable "Born with the Dead" (April 1974) and "Sundance" (June 1969). He writes that he still has the very first issue of F&SF, which he purchased as a 14-year-old boy, and "it's in pretty nice shape, too, considering all that it and its owner have been through over the past four decades."

Tales from the Venia Woods

By Robert Silverberg

THIS ALL HAPPENED a long time ago, in the early decades of the Second Republic, when I was a boy growing up in Upper Pannonia. Life was very simple then, at least for us. We lived in a forest village on the right bank of the Danubius, my parents, my grandmother, my sister Friya, and I. My father Tyr, for whom I was named, was a blacksmith, my mother Julia taught school in our house, and my grandmother was the priestess at the little Temple of Juno Teutonica nearby.

It was a very quiet life. The automobile hadn't yet been invented then — all this was around the year 2650, and we still used horsedrawn carriages or wagons — and we hardly ever left the village. Once a year, on Augustus Day — back then we still celebrated Augustus Day — we would all dress in our finest clothes and my father would get our big iron-bound carriage out of the shed, the one he had built with his own hands, and we'd drive to the great municipium of Venia, a two-hour journey away, to hear the imperial band playing waltzes in the Plaza of Vespasian. Afterward

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there'd be cakes and whipped cream at the big hotel nearby, and tankards of cherry beer for the grownups, and then we'd begin the long trip home. Today, of course, the forest is gone and our little village has been swallowed up by the ever-growing municipium, and it's a twenty-minute ride by car to the center of the city from where we used to live. But at that time it was a grand excursion, the event of the year for us.

I know now that Venia is only a minor provincial city, that compared with *Londin* or *Parisi* or *Roma* itself it's nothing at all. But to me it was the capital of the world. Its splendors stunned me and dazed me. We would climb to the top of the great column of Basileus Andronicus, which the Greeks put up eight hundred years ago to commemorate their victory over Caesar Maximilianus during the Civil War in the days when the Empire was divided, and we'd stare out at the whole city; and my mother, who had grown up in Venia, would point everything out to us, the senate building, the opera house, the aqueduct, the university, the ten bridges, the Temple of Jupiter Teutonicus, the proconsul's palace, the much greater palace that Trajan VII built for himself during that dizzying period when Venia was essentially the second capital of the Empire, and so forth. For days afterward my dreams would glitter with memories of what I had seen in Venia, and my sister and I would hum waltzes as we whirled along the quiet forest paths.

There was one exciting year when we made the Venia trip twice. That was 2647, when I was ten years old, and I can remember it so exactly because that was the year when the First Consul died — C. Junius Scaevola, I mean, the Founder of the Second Republic. My father was very agitated when the news of his death came. "It'll be touch and go now, touch and go, mark my words," he said over and over. I asked my grandmother what he meant by that, and she said, "Your father's afraid that they'll bring back the Empire, now that the old man's dead." I didn't see what was so upsetting about that — it was the same to me, Republic or Empire, Consul or Imperator — but to my father it was a big issue, and when the new First Consul came to Venia later that year, touring the entire vast Imperium province by province for the sake of reassuring everyone that the Republic was stable and intact, my father got out the carriage and we went to attend his Triumph and Processional. So I had a second visit to the capital that year.

Half a million people, so they say, turned out in downtown Venia to

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applaud the new First Consul. This was N. Marcellus Turritus, of course. You probably think of him as the fat, bald old man on the coinage of the late 27th century that still shows up in pocket change now and then, but the man I saw that day — I had just a glimpse of him, a fraction of a second as the consular chariot rode past, but the memory still blazes in my mind seventy years later — was lean and virile, with a jutting jaw and fiery eyes and dark, thick curling hair. We threw up our arms in the old Roman salute and at the top of our lungs we shouted out to him, "Hail, Marcellus! Long live the Consul!"

(We shouted it, by the way, not in Latin but in Germanisch. I was very surprised at that. My father explained afterward that it was by the First Consul's own orders. He wanted to show his love for the people by encouraging all the regional languages, even at a public celebration like this one. The Gallians had hailed him in Gallian, the Britannians in Britannic, the Japanese in whatever it is they speak there, and as he traveled through the Teutonic provinces he wanted us to yell his praises in Germanisch. I realize that there are some people today, very conservative Republicans, who will tell you that this was a terrible idea, because it has led to the resurgence of all kinds of separatist regional activities in the Imperium. It was the same sort of regionalist fervor, they remind us, that brought about the crumbling of the Empire two hundred years earlier. To men like my father, though, it was a brilliant political stroke, and he cheered the new First Consul with tremendous Germanisch exuberance and vigor. But my father managed to be a staunch regionalist and a stauch Republican at the same time. Bear in mind that over my mother's fierce objections he had insisted on naming his children for ancient Teutonic gods instead of giving them the standard Roman names that everybody else in Pannonia favored then.)

Other than going to Venia once a year, or on this one occasion twice, I never went anywhere. I hunted, I fished, I swam, I helped my father in the smithy, I helped my grandmother in the Temple, I studied reading and writing in my mother's school. Sometimes Friya and I would go wandering in the forest, which in those days was dark and lush and mysterious. And that was how I happened to meet the last of the Caesars.

There was supposed to be a haunted house deep in the woods. Marcus Aurelius Schwarzchild it was who got me interested in it, the tailor's son,

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a sly and unlikable boy with a cast in one eye. He said it had been a hunting lodge in the time of the Caesars, and that the bloody ghost of an Emperor who had been killed in a hunting accident could be seen at noontime, the hour of his death, pursuing the ghost of a wolf around and around the building. "I've seen it myself," he said. "The ghost, I mean. He had a laurel wreath on, and everything, and his rifle was polished so it shined like gold."

I didn't believe him. I didn't think he'd had the courage to go anywhere near the haunted house and certainly not that he'd seen the ghost. Marcus Aurelius Schwarzchild was the sort of boy you wouldn't believe if he said it was raining, even if you were getting soaked to the skin right as he was saying it. For one thing, I didn't believe in ghosts, not very much. My father had told me it was foolish to think that the dead still lurked around in the world of the living. For another, I asked my grandmother if there had ever been an Emperor killed in a hunting accident in our forest, and she laughed and said no, not ever: the Imperial Guard would have razed the village to the ground and burned down the woods, if that had ever happened.

But nobody doubted that the house itself, haunted or not, was really there. Everyone in the village knew that. It was said to be in a certain dark part of the woods where the trees were so old that their branches were tightly woven together. Hardly anyone ever went there. The house was just a ruin, they said, and haunted besides, definitely haunted, so it was best to leave it alone.

It occurred to me that the place might just actually have been an imperial hunting lodge, and that if it had been abandoned hastily after some unhappy incident and never visited since, it might still have some trinkets of the Caesars in it, little statuettes of the gods, or cameos of the royal family, things like that. My grandmother collected small ancient objects of that sort. Her birthday was coming, and I wanted a nice gift for her. My fellow villagers might be timid about poking around in the haunted house, but why should I be? I didn't believe in ghosts, after all.

But on second thought I didn't particularly want to go there alone. This wasn't cowardice so much as sheer common sense, which even then I possessed in full measure. The woods were full of exposed roots hidden under fallen leaves; if you tripped on one and hurt your leg, you would lie there a long time before anyone who might help you came by. You were

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also less likely to lose your way if you had someone else with you who could remember trail marks. And there was some occasional talk of wolves. I figured the probability of my meeting one wasn't much better than the likelihood of ghosts, but all the same it seemed like a sensible idea to have a companion with me in that part of the forest. So I took my sister along.

I have to confess that I didn't tell her that the house was supposed to be haunted. Friya, who was about nine then, was very brave for a girl, but I thought she might find the possibility of ghosts a little discouraging. What I did tell her was that the old house might still have imperial treasures in it, and if it did she could have her pick of any jewelry we found.

Just to be on the safe side we slipped a couple of holy images into our pockets — Apollo for her, to cast light on us as we went through the dark woods, and Woden for me, since he was my father's special god. (My grandmother always wanted him to pray to Jupiter Teutonicus, but he never would, saying Jupiter Teutonicus was a god that the Romans invented to pacify our ancestors. This made my grandmother angry, naturally. "But *we* are Romans," she would say. "Yes, we are," my father would tell her, "but we're Teutons also, or at least I am, and I don't intend to forget it.")

It was a fine Saturday morning in spring when we set out, Friya and I, right after breakfast, saying nothing to anybody about where we were going. The first part of the forest path was a familiar one: we had traveled it often. We went past Agrippina's Spring, which in medieval times was thought to have magical powers, and then the three battered and weather-beaten statues of the pretty young boy who was supposed to be the first Emperor Hadrian's lover two thousand years ago, and after that we came to Baldur's Tree, which my father said was sacred, though he died before I was old enough to attend the midnight rituals that he and some of his friends used to hold there. (I think my father's generation was the last one that took the old Teutonic religion seriously.)

Then we got into deeper, darker territory. The paths were nothing more than sketchy trails here. Marcus Aurelius had told me that we were supposed to turn left at a huge old oak tree with unusual glossy leaves. I was still looking for it when Friya said, "We turn here," and there was the shiny-leaved oak. I hadn't mentioned it to her. So perhaps the girls of

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our village told each other tales about the haunted house too; but I never found out how she knew which way to go.

Onward and onward we went, until even the trails gave out, and we were wandering through sheer wilderness. The trees were ancient here, all right, and their boughs were interlaced high above us so that almost no sunlight reached the forest floor. But we didn't see any houses, haunted or otherwise, or anything else that indicated human beings had ever been here. We'd been hiking for hours, now. I kept one hand on the idol of Woden in my pocket and I stared hard at every unusual looking tree or rock we saw, trying to engrave it on my brain for use as a trail marker on the way back.

It seemed pointless to continue, and dangerous besides. I would have turned back long before, if Friya hadn't been with me; but I didn't want to look like a coward in front of her. And she was forging on in a tireless way, inflamed, I guess, by the prospect of finding a fine brooch or necklace for herself in the old house, and showing not the slightest trace of fear or uneasiness. But finally I had had enough.

"If we don't come across anything in the next five minutes —" I said.

"There," said Friya. "Look."

I followed her pointing hand. At first all I saw was more forest. But then I noticed, barely visible behind a curtain of leafy branches, what could have been the sloping wooden roof of a rustic hunting lodge. Yes! Yes, it was! I saw the scalloped gables, I saw the boldly carved roof-posts.

So it was really there, the secret forest lodge, the old haunted house. In frantic excitement I began to run toward it, Friya chugging valiantly along behind me, struggling to catch up.

And then I saw the ghost.

He was old — ancient — a frail, gaunt figure, white-bearded, his long white hair a tangle of knots and snarls. His clothing hung in rags. He was walking slowly toward the house, shuffling, really, a bent and stooped and trembling figure clutching a huge stack of kindling to his breast. I was practically on top of him before I knew he was there.

For a long moment we stared at each other, and I can't say which of us was the more terrified. Then he made a little sighing sound and let his bundle of firewood fall to the ground, and fell down beside it, and lay there like one dead.

"Marcus Aurelius was right!" I murmured. "There really is a ghost here!"

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Friya shot me a glance that must have been a mixture of scorn and derision and real anger besides, for this was the first she had heard of the ghost story that I had obviously taken pains to conceal from her. But all she said was, "Ghosts don't fall down and faint, silly. He's nothing but a scared old man." And went to him unhesitatingly.

SOMEHOW WE got him inside the house, though he tottered and lurched all the way and nearly fell half a dozen times. The place wasn't quite a ruin, but close: dust everywhere, furniture that looked as if it'd collapse into splinters if you touched it, draperies hanging in shreds. Behind all the filth we could see how beautiful it all once had been, though. There were faded paintings on the walls, some sculptures, a collection of arms and armor worth a fortune.

He was terrified of us. "Are you from the quaestors?" he kept asking. Latin was what he spoke. "Are you here to arrest me? I'm only the caretaker, you know. I'm not any kind of a danger. I'm only the caretaker." His lips quavered. "Long live the First Consul!" he cried, in a thin, hoarse, ragged croak of a voice.

"We were just wandering in the woods," I told him. "You don't have to be afraid of us."

"I'm only the caretaker," he said again and again.

We laid him out on a couch. There was a spring just outside the house, and Friya brought water from it and sponged his cheeks and brow. He looked half starved, so we prowled around for something to feed him, but there was hardly anything: some nuts and berries in a bowl, a few scraps of smoked meat that looked like they were a hundred years old, a piece of fish that was in better shape, but not much. We fixed a meal for him, and he ate slowly, very slowly, as if he were unused to food. Then he closed his eyes without a word. I thought for a moment that he had died, but no, no, he had simply dozed off. We stared at each other, not knowing what to do.

"Let him be," Friya whispered, and we wandered around the house while we waited for him to awaken. Cautiously we touched the sculptures, we blew dust away from the paintings. No doubt of it, there had been imperial grandeur here. In one of the upstairs cupboards I found some coins, old ones, the kind with the Emperor's head on them that weren't allowed to be used any more. I saw trinkets, too, a couple of necklaces and a jewel-handled dagger. Friya's eyes gleamed at the sight of

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the necklaces, and mine at the dagger, but we let everything stay where it was. Stealing from a ghost is one thing, stealing from a live old man is another. And we hadn't been raised to be thieves.

When we went back downstairs to see how he was doing, we found him sitting up, looking weak and dazed, but not quite so frightened. Friya offered him some more smoked meat, but he smiled and shook his head.

"From the village, are you? How old are you? What are your names?"

"This is Friya," I said. "I'm Tyr. She's nine and I'm twelve."

"Friya. Tyr." He laughed. "Time was when such names wouldn't have been permitted, eh? But times have changed." There was a flash of sudden vitality in his eyes, though only for an instant. He gave us a confidential, intimate smile. "Do you know whose place this was, you two? The Emperor Maxentius, that's who! This was his hunting lodge. Caesar himself! He'd stay here when the stags were running, and hunt his fill, and then he'd go on into Venia, to Trajan's palace, and there'd be such feasts as you can't imagine, rivers of wine, and the haunches of venison turning on the spit — ah, what a time that was, what a time!"

He began to cough and sputter. Friya put her arm around his thin shoulders.

"You shouldn't talk so much, sir. You don't have the strength."

"You're right. You're right." He patted her hand. His was like a skeleton's. "How long ago it all was. But here I stay, trying to keep the place up — in case Caesar ever wanted to hunt here again — in case — in case —" A look of torment, of sorrow. "There isn't any Caesar, is there? First Consul! Hail! Hail Junius Scaevola!" His voice cracked as he raised it.

"The Consul Junius is dead, sir," I told him. "Marcus Turritus is First Consul now."

"Dead? Scaevola? Is that so?" He shrugged. "I hear so little news. I'm only the caretaker, you know. I never leave the place. Keeping it up, in case — in case —"

BUT OF course he wasn't the caretaker. Friya never thought he was: she had seen, right away, the resemblance between that shriveled old man and the magnificent figure of Caesar Maxentius in the painting behind him on the wall. You had to ignore the difference in age — the Emperor couldn't have been much more than thirty when his portrait was painted — and the fact that the Emperor was

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in resplendent bemedalled formal uniform and the old man was wearing rags. But they had the same long chin, the same sharp, hawklike nose, the same penetrating icy-blue eyes. It was the royal face, all right. I hadn't noticed; but girls have a quicker eye for such things. The Emperor Maxentius' younger brother was who this gaunt old man was, Quintus Fabius Caesar, the last survivor of the old imperial house, and therefore, the true Emperor himself. Who had been living in hiding ever since the downfall of the Empire at the end of the Second War of Reunification.

He didn't tell us any of that, though, until our third or fourth visit. He went on pretending he was nothing but a simple old man who had happened to be stranded here when the old regime was overthrown, and was simply trying to do his job, despite the difficulties of age, on the chance that the royal family might some day be restored and would want to use its hunting lodge again.

But he began to give us little gifts, and that eventually led to his admitting his true identity.

For Friya he had a delicate necklace made of long slender bluish beads. "It comes from Aiguptos," he said. "It's thousands of years old. You've studied Aiguptos in school, haven't you? You know that it was a great empire long before Roma ever was?" And with his own trembling hands he put it around her neck.

That same day he gave me a leather pouch in which I found four or five triangular arrowheads made of a pink stone that had been carefully chipped sharp around the edges. I looked at them, mystified. "From Nova Roma," he explained. "Where the redskinned people live. The Emperor Maxentius loved Nova Roma, especially the far west, where the bison herds are. He went there almost every year to hunt. Do you see the trophies?" And, indeed, the dark musty room was lined with animal heads, great massive bison with thick curling brown wool, glowering down out of the gallery high above.

We brought him food, sausages and black bread that we brought from home, and fresh fruit, and beer. He didn't care for the beer, and asked rather timidly if we could bring him wine instead. "I am Roman, you know," he reminded us. Getting wine for him wasn't so easy, since we never used it at home, and a twelve-year-old boy could hardly go around to the wineshop to buy some without starting tongues wagging. In the end I stole some from the Temple while I was helping out my grandmother. It

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was thick sweet wine, the kind used for offerings, and I don't know how much he liked it. But he was grateful. Apparently an old couple who lived on the far side of the woods had looked after him for some years, bringing him food and wine, but in recent weeks they hadn't been around and he had had to forage for himself, with little luck: that was why he was so gaunt. He was afraid they were ill or dead, but when I asked where they lived, so I could find out whether they were all right, he grew uneasy and refused to tell me. I wondered about that. If I had realized then who he was, and that the old couple must have been Empire loyalists, I'd have understood. But I still hadn't figured out the truth.

Friya broke it to me that afternoon, as we were on our way home. "Do you think he's the Emperor's brother, Tyr? Or the Emperor himself?"

"What?"

"He's got to be one or the other. It's the same face."

"I don't know what you're talking about, sister."

"The big portrait on the wall, silly. Of the Emperor. Haven't you noticed that it looks just like him?"

I thought she was out of her mind. But when we went back the following week, I gave the painting a long close look, and looked at him, and then at the painting again, and I thought, yes, yes, it might just be so.

What clinched it were the coins he gave us that day. "I can't pay you in money of the Republic for all you've brought me," he said. "But you can have these. You can't spend them, but they're still valuable to some people, I understand. As relics of history." His voice was bitter. From a worn old velvet pouch he drew out half a dozen coins, some copper, some silver. "These are coins of Maxentius," he said. They were like the ones we had seen while snooping in the upstairs cupboards on our first visit, showing the same face as on the painting, that of a young, vigorous bearded man. "And these are older ones, coins of Emperor Laureolus, who was Caesar when I was a boy."

"Why, he looks just like you!" I blurted.

Indeed he did. Not nearly so gaunt, and his hair and beard were better trimmed; but otherwise the face of the regal old man on those coins might easily have been that of our friend the caretaker. I stared at him. He began to tremble. I looked at the painting on the wall behind us again. "No," he said faintly. "No, no, you're mistaken — I'm nothing like him, nothing at all —" And his shoulders shook and he began to cry. Friya brought him

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some wine, which steadied him a little. He took the coins from me and looked at them in silence a long while, shaking his head sadly, and finally handed them back. "Can I trust you with a secret?" he asked. And his tale came pouring out of him.

A glittering boyhood, almost sixty years earlier, in that wondrous time between the two Wars of Reunification: a magical life, endlessly traveling from palace to palace, from Roma to Venia, from Venia to Constantinopolis, from Constantinopolis to Nishapur. He was the youngest and most pampered of five royal princes; his father had died young, drowned in a foolish swimming exploit, and when his grandfather Laureolus Caesar died the imperial throne would go to his brother Maxentius. He himself, Quintus Fabius, would be a provincial governor somewhere when he grew up, perhaps in India or Nova Roma, but for now there was nothing for him to do but enjoy his gilded existence.

Then death came at last to old Emperor Laureolus, and Maxentius succeeded him; and almost at once there began the ten-year horror of the Second War of Reunification, when somber and harsh colonels who despised the lazy old Empire smashed it to pieces, rebuilt it as a Republic, and drove the Caesars from power. We knew the story, of course; but to us it was a tale of triumph of virtue and honor over corruption and tyranny. To Quintus Fabius, weeping as he told it to us from his own point of view, the fall of the Empire had been not only a harrowing personal tragedy but a terrible disaster for the entire world.

Good little Republicans though we were, our hearts were wrung by the things he told us, the scenes of his family's agony: the young Emperor Maxentius trapped in his own palace, gunned down with his wife and children at the entrance to the imperial baths. Camillus, the second brother, who had been Prince of Constantinopolis, pursued through the streets of Roma at dawn and slaughtered by revolutionaries on the steps of the Temple of Castor and Pollux. Prince Flavius, the third brother, escaping the capital in a peasant's wagon, hidden under huge bunches of grapes, setting up a government-in-exile in Neapolis, only to be taken and executed before he had been Emperor a full week. Which brought the succession down to sixteen-year-old Prince Augustus, who had been at the university in Parisi. Well named, he was: for the first of all Emperors was an Augustus, and another one two thousand years later was the last, reigning all of three days before the men of the Second Republic

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found him and put him before the firing squad.

Of the royal princes, only Quintus Fabius remained. But in the confusion he was overlooked. He was hardly more than a boy; and, although technically he was now Caesar, it never occurred to him to claim the throne. Loyalist supporters dressed him in peasant clothes and smuggled him out of Roma while the capital was still in flames, and he set out on what was to become a lifetime of exile.

"There were always places for me to stay," he told us. "In out-of-the-way towns where the Republic had never really taken hold, in backwater provinces, in places you've never heard of. The Republic searched for me for a time, but never very well, and then the story began to circulate that I was dead. The skeleton of some boy found in the ruins of the palace in Roma was said to be mine. After that I could move around more or less freely, though always in poverty, always in secrecy."

"And when did you come here?" I asked.

"Almost twenty years ago. Friends told me that this hunting lodge was here, still more or less intact as it had been at the time of the Revolution, and that no one ever went near it, that I could live here undisturbed. And so I have. And so I will, for however much time is left." He reached for the wine, but his hands were shaking so badly that Friya took it from him and poured him a glass. He drank it in a single gulp. "Ah, children, children, what a world you've lost! What madness it was, to destroy the Empire! What greatness existed then!"

"Our father says things have never been so good for ordinary folk as they are under the Republic," Friya said.

I kicked her ankle. She gave me a sour look.

Quintus Fabius said sadly, "I mean no disrespect, but your father sees only his own village. We were trained to see the entire world in a glance. The Imperium, the whole globe-spanning Empire. Do you think the gods meant to give the Imperium just to anyone at all? Anyone who could grab power and proclaim himself First Consul? Ah, no, no, the Caesars were uniquely chosen to sustain the Pax Romana, the universal peace that has enfolded this whole planet for so long. Under us there was nothing but peace, peace eternal and unshakable, once the Empire had reached its complete form. But with the Caesars now gone, how much longer do you think the peace will last? If one man can take power, so can another, or another. There will be five First Consuls at once, mark my words. Or fifty.

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And every province will want to be an Empire in itself. Mark my words, children. Mark my words."

The Pax Romana? *What* Pax Romana? Old Quintus Fabius would have had us believe that the Empire had brought unbroken and unshakeable peace to the entire world, and had kept it that way for twenty centuries. But what about the Civil War, when the Greek half of the Empire fought for fifty years against the Latin half? Or the two Wars of Unification? And hadn't there been minor rebellions constantly, all over the Empire, hardly a century without one, in Persia, in India, in Britannica, in Africa Aethiopica? No, I thought, what he's telling us simply isn't true. The long life of the Empire had been a time of constant brutal oppression, with people's spirits held in check everywhere by military force. The real Pax Romana was something that existed only in modern times, under the Second Republic. So my father had taught me.

But Quintus Fabius was an old man, wrapped in dreams of his own wondrous lost childhood. Far be it from me to argue with him about such matters as these. I simply smiled and nodded, and poured more wine for him when his glass was empty. And Friya and I sat there spellbound as he told us, hour after hour, of what it had been like to be a prince of the royal family in the dying days of the Empire, before true grandeur had departed forever from the world.

When we left him that day, he had still more gifts for us. "My brother was a great collector," he said. "He had whole houses stuffed full of treasure. All gone now, all but what you see here, which no one remembered. When I'm gone, who knows what'll become of them? But I want you to have these. Because you've been so kind to me. To remember me by. And to remind you always of what once was, and now is lost."

For Friya there was a small bronze ring, dented and scratched, with a serpent's head on it, that he said had belonged to the Emperor Claudius of the earliest days of the Empire. For me a dagger, not the jewel-handled one I had seen upstairs, but a fine one all the same, with a strange undulating blade, from a savage kingdom on an island in the Oceanus Magnus. And for us both, a beautiful little figure in smooth white alabaster of Pan playing on his pipes, carved by some master craftsman of the ancient days.

The figurine was the perfect birthday gift for grandmother. We gave it to her the next day. We thought she would pleased, since all of the old gods of Roma are very dear to her; but to our surprise and dismay she

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seemed startled and upset by it. She stared at it, eyes bright and fierce, as if we had given her a venomous toad.

"Where did you get this thing? Where?"

I looked at Friya, to warn her not to say too much. But as usual she was ahead of me.

"We found it, grandmother. We dug it up."

"You dug it up?"

"In the forest," I put in. "We go there every Saturday, you know, just wandering around. There was this old mound of dirt — we were poking in it, and we saw something gleaming—"

She turned it over and over in her hands. I had never seen her look so troubled. "Swear to me that that's how you found it! Come, now, at the altar of Juno! I want you to swear to me before the Goddess. And then I want you to take me to see this mound of dirt of yours."

Friya gave me a panic-stricken glance.

Hesitantly I said, "We may not be able to find it again, grandmother. I told you, we were just wandering around — we didn't really pay attention to where we were—"

I grew red in the face, and I was stammering, too. It isn't easy to lie convincingly to your own grandmother.

She held the figurine out, its base toward me. "Do you see these marks here? This little crest stamped down here? It's the Imperial crest, Tyr. That's the mark of Caesar. This carving once belonged to the Emperor. Do you expect me to believe that there's Imperial treasure simply lying around in mounds of dirt in the forest? Come, both of you! To the altar, and swear!"

"We only wanted to bring you a pretty birthday gift, grandmother," Friya said softly. "We didn't mean to do any harm."

"Of course not, child. Tell me, now: where'd this thing come from?"

"The haunted house in the woods," she said. And I nodded my confirmation. What could I do? She would have taken us to the altar to swear.

STRICTLY SPEAKING, Friya and I were traitors to the Republic. We even knew that ourselves, from the moment we realized who the old man really was. The Caesars were proscribed when the Empire fell; everyone within a certain level of blood kinship to the Emperor was condemned to death, so that no one could rise up and claim the throne in years hereafter.

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Some minor members of the royal family did manage to escape, so it was said; but giving aid and comfort to them was a serious offense And this was no mere second cousin or great-grandnephew that we had discovered deep in the forest: this was the Emperor's own brother. He was, in fact, the legitimate Emperor himself, in the eyes of those for whom the Empire had never ended. And it was our responsibility to turn him in to the quaestors. But he was so old, so gentle, so feeble. We didn't see how he could be much of a threat to the Republic. Even if he did believe that the Revolution had been an evil thing, and that only under a divinely chosen Caesar could the world enjoy real peace.

We were children. We didn't understand what risks we were taking, or what perils we were exposing our family to.

Things were tense at our house during the next few days: whispered conferences between our grandmother and our mother, out of earshot, and then an evening when the two of them spoke with father while Friya and I were confined to our room, and there were sharp words and even some shouting. Afterward there was a long cold silence, followed by more mysterious discussions. Then things returned to normal. My grandmother never put the figurine of Pan in her collection of little artifacts of the old days, nor did she ever speak of it again.

That it had the imperial crest on it was, we realized, the cause of all the uproar. I had thought all along that grandmother was secretly an Empire loyalist herself. A lot of people her age were; and she was, after all, a traditionalist, a priestess of Juno Teutonica, who disliked the revived worship of the old Germanic gods that had sprung up in recent times — "pagan" gods, she called them — and had argued with father about his insistence on naming us as he had. So she should have been pleased to have something that had belonged to the Caesars. But, as I say, we were children then. We didn't take into account the fact that the Republic dealt harshly with anyone who practiced Caesarism. Or that whatever my grandmother's private political beliefs might have been, father was the unquestioned master of our household, and he was a devout Republican.

"I understand you've been poking around that old ruined house in the woods," my father said, a week or so later. "Stay away from it. Do you hear me? Stay away."

And so we would have, because it was plainly an order. We didn't disobey our father's orders.

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But then, a few days afterward, I overheard some of the older boys of the village talking about making a foray out to the haunted house. Evidently Marcus Aurelius Schwarzchild had been talking about the ghost with the polished rifle to others beside me, and they wanted the rifle. "It's five of us against one of him," I heard someone say. "We ought to be able to take care of him, ghost or not."

"What if it's a ghost rifle, though?" one of them asked. "A ghost rifle won't be any good to us."

"There's no such thing as a ghost rifle," the first speaker said. "Rifles don't have ghosts. It's a real rifle. And it won't be hard for us to get it away from a ghost."

I repeated all this to Friya.

"What should we do?" I asked her.

"Go out there and warn him. They'll hurt him, Tyr."

"But father said—"

"Even so. The old man's got to go somewhere and hide. Otherwise his blood will be on our heads."

There was no arguing with her. Either I went with her to the house in the woods that moment, or she'd go by herself. That left me with no choice. I prayed to Woden that my father wouldn't find out, or that he'd forgive me if he did; and off we went into the woods, past Agrippina's spring, past the statues of the pretty boy, past Baldur's Tree, and down the now-familiar path beyond the glossy-leaved oak.

"Something's wrong," Friya said, as we approached the hunting lodge. "I can tell."

Friya always had a strange way of knowing things. I saw the fear in her eyes and felt frightened myself.

We crept forward warily. There was no sign of Quintus Fabius. And when we came to the door of the lodge we saw that it was a little way ajar, and off its hinges, as if it had been forced. Friya put her hand on my arm and we stared at each other. I took a deep breath.

"You wait here," I said, and went in.

It was frightful in there. The place had been ransacked — the furniture smashed, the cupboards overturned, the sculptures in fragments. Someone had slashed every painting to shreds. The collection of arms and armor was gone.

I went from room to room, looking for Quintus Fabius. He wasn't there.

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But there were bloodstains on the floor of the main hall, still fresh, still sticky.

Friya was waiting on the porch, trembling, fighting back tears.

"We're too late," I told her.

It hadn't been the boys from the village, of course. They couldn't possibly have done such a thorough job. I realized — and surely so did Friya, though we were both too sickened by the realization to discuss it with each other — that grandmother must have told father we had found a cache of Imperial treasure in the old house, and he, good citizen that he was, had told the quaestors. Who had gone out to investigate, come upon Quintus Fabius, and recognized him for a Caesar, just as Friya had. So my eagerness to bring back a pretty gift for grandmother had been the old man's downfall. I suppose he wouldn't have lived much longer in any case, as frail as he was; but the guilt for what I unknowingly brought upon him is something that I've borne ever since.

Some years later, when the forest was mostly gone, the old house accidentally burned down. I was a young man then, and I helped out on the firefighting line. During a lull in the work I said to the captain of the fire brigade, a retired quaestor named Lucentius, "It was an Imperial hunting lodge once, wasn't it?"

"A long time ago, yes."

I studied him cautiously by the light of the flickering blaze. He was an older man, of my father's generation.

Carefully I said, "When I was a boy, there was a story going around that one of the last Emperor's brothers had hidden himself away in it. And that eventually the quaestors caught him and killed him."

He seemed taken off guard by that. He looked surprised and, for a moment, troubled. "So you heard about that, did you?"

"I wondered if there was any truth to it. That he was a Caesar, I mean."

Lucentius glanced away. "He was only an old tramp, is all," he said, in a muffled tone. "An old lying tramp. Maybe he told fantastic stories to some of the gullible kids, but a tramp is all he was, an old filthy lying tramp." He gave me a peculiar look. And then he stamped away to shout at someone who was uncoiling a hose the wrong way.

A filthy old tramp, yes. But not, I think, a liar.

He remains alive in my mind to this day, that poor old relic of the

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Empire. And now that I am old myself, as old, perhaps, as he was then, I understand something of what he was saying. Not his belief that there necessarily had to be a Caesar in order for there to be peace, for the Caesars were only men themselves, in no way different from the Consuls who have replaced them. But when he argued that the time of the Empire had been basically a time of peace, he may not have been really wrong, even if war had been far from unknown in Imperial days.

For I see now that war can sometimes be a kind of peace also: that the Civil Wars and the Wars of Reunification were the struggles of a sundered Empire trying to reassemble itself so peace might resume. These matters are not so simple. The Second Republic is not as virtuous as my father thought, nor was the old Empire, apparently, quite as corrupt. The only thing that seems true without dispute is that the worldwide hegemony of Roma these past two thousand years under the Empire and then under the Republic, troubled though it has occasionally been, has kept us from even worse turmoil. What if there had been no Roma? What if every region had been free to make war against its neighbors in the hope of creating the sort of Empire that the Romans were able to build? Imagine the madness of it! But the gods gave us the Romans, and the Romans gave us peace: not a perfect peace, but the best peace, perhaps, that an imperfect world could manage. Or so I think now.

In any case the Caesars are dead, and so is everyone else I have written about here, even my little sister Friya; and here I am, an old man of the Second Republic, thinking back over the past and trying to bring some sense out of it. I still have the strange dagger that Quintus Fabius gave me, the barbaric-looking one with the curious wavy blade, that came from some savage island in the Oceanus Magnus. Now and then I take it out and look at it. It shines with a kind of antique splendor in the lamplight. My eyes are too dim now to see the tiny imperial crest that someone engraved on its haft when the merchant captain who brought it back from the South Seas gave it to the Caesar of his time, four or five hundred years ago. Nor can I see the little letters, S P Q R, that are inscribed on the blade. For all I know, they were put there by the frizzy-haired tribesman who fashioned that odd, fierce weapon: for he, too, was a citizen of the Roman Empire. As in a manner of speaking are we all, even now in the days of the Second Republic. As are we all.

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Here is a strange and stylish piece of hard SF from one of its premier practitioners. Greg Benford's latest books are TIDES OF LIGHT (Bantam) and BEYOND THE FALL OF NIGHT (with Arthur C. Clarke), upcoming from Putnam. He will also be the host narrator for a PBS series to air in 1991 titled A GALACTIC ODYSSEY.

Mozart on Morphine

By Gregory Benford

As a working hypothesis to explain the riddle of our existence, I propose that our universe is the most interesting of all possible universes, and our fate as human beings is to make it so.

— Freeman Dyson, 1988

All theory, dear friend, is grey,
But the golden tree of life springs ever green.

— Goethe, *Faust*

I READ A FRAGMENT of God's mind, during that summer when He seemed to be trying to stop me.

I realize this is not the usual way such proceedings go, with their pomp and gravity. But please bear with me. I shall try to talk of matters that scientists usually avoid, even though these are crucial to the unspoken rhythms of our trade.

I live in a small community spread before the Pacific like a welcoming grin, thin but glistening in the golden shafts of sunlight. That unrelenting

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brilliance mocked by my dark internal chaos as I struggled with mathematical physics. I worked through the day on my patio, the broad blue of ocean lying with Euclidean grace beyond, perspective taking it away into measureless infinity. Endless descending glare mocked my gnarled equations, their confusion the only stain on nature.

My habit was to conclude a frustrating day of particle theory by running on the beach. The salt air cleared my mind. The sun hung low and red, and I pounded along crisply warm sand, vacantly watching the crumbling, thumping waves. I paid no attention to the small crowd forming up ahead, and so when the first shot came, it took me completely by surprise.

I saw the teenagers scattering and the scrawny man in his twenties poking the small silvery gun at them, yelling something I couldn't make out. I assumed as an automatic axiom that the gun was loaded with blanks; certainly it wasn't very loud.

The man started swearing at a kid near me, who was moving to my right. I was still doggedly running, so when the second shot came, I was just behind the kid, and the round went *tssiiip!* by my head.

No blanks, no. I did the next hundred meters in ten seconds, digging hard into the suddenly cloying sand, and turning to look back only once. A third thin splat followed me up the beach, but no screams — just more swearing from the skinny man, who was backing up the gray concrete stairs and trying to keep the pack of kids from following him.

From a hundred meters away, I watched him fire one last time, not trying to hit anybody now, just holding the gang at bay. Then he turned and ran up onto the street beyond.

I thumped back down the beach amid buzzing spectators. It was evidently a drug deal gone bust. The kids had started jazzing the thin man around, and he got mad.

The police caught him on the streets above. I watched them read him his *Miranda* rights . . . and, unbidden, my mind gave me a tiny clue about the equations that I had labored over all day. Just like that.

Churchill once said that there was nothing as exhilarating as being shot at and missed.

Perhaps that explained the spurt in my research through the following week. I found some fresh mathematical tricks, a new conformal transformation. Problems rearranged themselves.

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I had been pursuing a model for the universe that did not begin with any assumption about its dimensionality. We are used to our cozy three spatial directions, plus ever-flowing time — four dimensions in all. When God made everything, was this choice forced? Could the deep laws governing matter work well in, say, six dimensions? Twenty-six?

The question reeks of arrogance, of course. Just *what* or *who* could force God?

Still, my imagination swept on freely. My pencil scribbled long chains of symbols as I sat on my deck and contemplated the beach below, where that *tssiiip!* had flown past.

I interrupted my muse to fly East and visit my parents on their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Alabama was sultry, the weight of its air somehow reassuring.

If you work in arcane labyrinths, conversations with parents circle around matters in which all are equally ignorant — politics, children, economics. I felt myself falling away from the glide of cool mathematics that, I knew, underlay everything.

I went with my father to the anniversary reception after that morning's church service. It was a moist, sunny day. I lazily breathed in the pine scent as my father pulled up at a stop sign. He started off, and something darted in the corner of my vision. It was a car that a nearby telephone junction box had hidden from view, coming fast on the right. I yelled, "Dad, stop!" as if it were one word. He hit the brake, and the car smashed into our side.

The windshield cracked into diamondlike shards. Steel jabbed into my head. The pain did not register, but blood gushed down my face.

There was yelling and a spreading ache in my temple. My father pulled me across the seat, brushing glass to the floor. Shakily, I stood on the tarry road and helped my father tear my shirt off. We used it to stop the bleeding. I kept saying, ". . . like a stuck pig . . . ," in wonder at the cascade of blood that had soaked me.

The tight knot at my brow was a fist holding my life in. I leaned against the car and felt light, airy. I studied the geometry of the accident, and saw that if my father had not stomped down on the brake, they would have come smack in on my side of the car and probably right through the door. "It was *that* close," my father murmured to himself.

The people in the other car were badly shaken up. In the hushed

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moments following the big banging surprise, facts assembled like congealing particles. The other driver wasn't wearing shoes. Her car was borrowed. She had broken her hand. She sat in the red clay ditch, rocking and moaning.

My father took it all quite mildly, but my ears rang with alarm. I could smell the pine trees even more strongly now. The broad-bladed grass, the azaleas, bright yellow flowers — ingenious implements of a propagating, abundant nature. This impossibly sharp world, and my persistence in it, demanded equally hard-edged explanation.

The vexing riddle of that waning summer stemmed from my reductionist impulse. I share it with all physicists.

The spirit of Einstein moves us still: we try to find the unifying principles behind the universe by looking for symmetries hidden in the laws that govern matter. The greatest scientists are unifiers — Newton, Einstein — and, indeed, nature often begins its grand work with a simple, unified start. In the beginning a homogeneous ocean somehow differentiated into cells and microlife, predators and prey. A common ancestry of apes managed to break their smooth symmetry into such as we, with our complicated symbol-scribbling languages and cultures. It is a recurring theme: diversity from unity.

Our bias is to seek that primordial unity. We hope that all of nature once started with just such serene symmetry. A commanding single Law fractured as the universe expanded, splitting the unity, spilling forth the four fragmentary forces we now know.

And what odd forces they are. Gravity pins us to our solitary planet. Electromagnetism brings us light that whispers of far galaxies, of strange cosmologies. Stars glow in the boundless black, fueled by fusing atoms that obey the weak force. And underneath the seeming solidity of matter lurks the strong force, a glue binding nuclei.

I labored to find that single, unified parent force. No laboratory experiment can lead us to it, for the energies demanded must rival those of time's first thin instant. So it is up to argonauts on mathematical seas to chart the shadow curve of that Ur-Law.

Consider in turn the breadth of our universe, then the earth, then a nucleus, finally a thin wedge called a superstring. Each step downward in scale is by twenty orders of magnitude. That is how remote our theories have become.

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Such smallness preoccupied me then. The image of a tiny wriggling string informed my nights, my dreams.

I sometimes awoke, my head still aching from the accident. I was uncomfortably aware that my mind was cradled in a shell of bone, my precarious reason hostage to blunt forces. Intelligence was besieged.

A friend of mine once referred to our brains as "meat computers." She was involved in the study of artificial intelligence, and as the aches slowly ebbed, I often thought of her coarse, but perhaps true, remark. Yet my own head still bowed over the intricacies of theory.

IN LATE September I was making my final plans to go to a conference in India, when I developed stomach pains. My children had the same symptoms, a standard flu that was going around. I stayed in bed a few days and expected it to go away. I was doing pretty well, running a little fever, though the pain had moved down somewhat.

I went into the university for half a day to see my thesis students. Around noon I was sitting in my office, when the pain got much worse. I couldn't stand up. The world contracted to a sphere with me pinned at its center. I called a doctor near the university and made an appointment and waited out the pain. It subsided, and I began to think life would resume its linear logic. But in the doctor's office, I showed an elevated white blood count and a fever and some dehydration. When she poked my right side, a lance drove through me.

She thought it might be appendicitis, and that I should go to an emergency room nearby. I thought she was making too much of it, and wanted something for my mild pain. I wanted to go to the hospital near my home, where I knew the doctors. She called an ambulance, but I was pumped up by then, and went out and got into my car and drove very fast, skating down the canyon road. The bleached hills lay beneath a hammering sun.

It was the real thing, of course. Soon enough I watched the fluorescent lights glide by as the anesthetist pushed me into the operating room. He said I must have a high tolerance for pain, because the appendix was obviously swollen and sensitive. I asked him how quickly the drugs took effect. He said, "Well . . . ," and then I was staring at the ceiling of my hospital room, and it was half a day later.

I had a good night, slept well. In the morning my doctor told me his suspicions had been right — that when the pain got bad in my office, it

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had been the appendix bursting. By the time they opened me up, the stuff had spread. I asked to see the appendix, and they brought it up to me later, a red lumpy thing with white speckles all over the top of it. I asked what the speckles were, and the aide said casually, "Oh, that's gangrene. It's riddled with the stuff."

The doctor said there was a 60 percent chance the antibiotics would not take out the gangrene that had spread throughout my lower abdomen. Mathematical probability carries little weight in the psyche. Of course I figured I would be in the lucky 40 percent.

By the early hours of the next morning, I knew I was wrong. A fever swarmed over me. I had stood up and walked around in the afternoon, but when the night nurse tried it with me again, I couldn't get to my feet. I was throwing up vile, sour stuff; and the orderly was talking to me about inserting some tubes; and then the tube was going in my nose and down my throat; and a bottle nearby was filling with brown bile, lots of it, a steady flow.

I couldn't sleep, even with the drugs. There was talk about not giving me too many drugs for fear of suppressing my central nervous system too much. This didn't make much sense to me — but then, little did.

Events ran together. The doctor appeared and said the antibiotics weren't working: my white count was soaring. A man came by and reminded me to use the plastic tube with a ball in it that the nurse had given me the day before. You blew into it and kept a ball in the air to exercise your general respiration. It seemed dumb to me — I could breathe fine — but I did it anyway and asked for some breakfast. I wasn't getting any. They fed me from an array of bottles going into my IV, and wouldn't give me more than ice chips to suck on.

Quick, watery, white-smocked beings surrounded me. My fever climbed a degree every two hours, and my wife patted my brow with a cool cloth, and I wanted some food. I didn't see how they could expect a man to get better if they didn't feed him. All they did was talk too fast and add more bottles to the antibiotic array. They started oxygen, but it didn't clear my head any. My IV closed off from vascular shock. A man kept punching my arms with needles, trying to find a better way in. Carefully and reasonably, I told him to knock it off. And get me something to eat.

They tilted me back so the doctor could put a subclavial tube in close to my heart. It would monitor the flow there and provide easy access for

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the IV. Then I was wheeling beneath soft, cool fluorescents, into a big, quiet room. The intensive care unit, a large voice said. I lay for a time absolutely calm and restful, and realized that I was in trouble. The guy with the breathing tube and ball was gone, but the nurses made me do it anyway, which still struck me as dumb, because I wasn't going to stop breathing, was I? If they would just give me some food, I would get better.

After the gusts of irritation passed, I saw in a clear moment that I was enormously tired. I hadn't slept in the night. The tubes in my nose tugged at me when I moved. They had slipped a catheter into me, surprisingly painless, and I felt wired to the machines around me, no longer an independent entity, but rather, a collaboration. If I lay still with my hands curled on my chest, I could rest, maybe; and if I could rest, I could get through this. So I concentrated on that one irreducible quantum of fact, and on how blissful it felt after the nurse gave me another injection of morphine, on how I could just forget about the world and let the world worry about me instead.

I woke in the evening. I had been dreaming of giant cylinders and pyramids rolling and thumping on a cool blue plain, enormous geometric buildings jostling merrily on the ocean below my patio.

The next morning my doctor startled me awake. It was as though I had come in at midsentence in someone else's life. I was better. They had called in more exotic antibiotics, which had stopped the fever's rise, leveling it off at 105 degrees. But I was still in danger, and the next day would be crucial.

The room still swarmed with prickly light. My wife came, wearing a peasant dress and ponytail, echoing her artsy college days. I made a joke about this that neither she nor the nurses could understand. At death's gateway there was nothing to do but wrap scraps of tattered wit about us.

She had brought my Sony and a case of tapes. They would shut out the hospital like an airport, its constant rhythm of comings and goings. I wanted to skate on that blue plain of my dreams; something waited there.

I had the nurse put the headphones on me and start a tape. She looked at me oddly, and I wondered if I was making any sense. The swirl of a rondo swept me away.

They had me on demand morphine. Every hour or so, I called for an injection and lifted off the sheets and spun through airy reaches, Mozart on morphine, skimming along the ceilings of rooms where well-dressed

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people looked up at me with pleased expressions, interrupted as they dined on opulent plates of veal and cauliflower and rich, pungent sauces; rooms where I would be again sometime, among people whom I knew but had no time for now, since I kept flying along softly lit yellow ceilings, above crimson couches and sparkling white tablecloths and smiles and mirth. Toward the blue geometries. Mozart had understood all this, and had seen in this endless gavotte a way to loft and sweep and glide, going, to have ample ripe substance without weight.

Physicists don't live in the real world. We have become so decoupled (another physicists' jargon word) that we regard reality's rub as hopelessly crude, an amusing approximation.

From tangible matter we slide easily down to tales of fields and particles. Rubbery, compliant, these fields follow clean differential equations.

Below those lie more profound truths: the symmetry groups that relate fields and particles through deft mathematical twists. Most particle physicists labor in this realm.

But now, I saw, there yawned a deeper level of abstraction: symmetry groups themselves were blunt beings, best seen as states realized in a ten-dimensional space-time. In this larger universe, our dull doings in three dimensions, plus time, were as the crawlings of insects.

And still more: superstrings. Their dynamics define the states possible in that ten-space. The ripple of their motions in that immensely larger universe sent tides lapping into lesser dimensions, wakes spreading like the whorls of passing ocean liners.

That was what I saw in the days that followed. It was all there. Abstractions, yes — but I also felt strumming kinesthetic senses, taking me where the mathematics led. I could tie the superstrings into knots, make of them what I wanted. Unimaginably small, they still had to follow the serene logic of mathematics. I *knew*.

WHEN THE doctor took the stitches out a week later, he said casually, "Y'know, you were the closest call I've had in a year. Another twelve hours, and you would've been gone."

In November I went to India anyway. I hadn't fully recovered, but it seemed important not to let a strange new sense in me, the calm acceptance of mortality, deflect me from life itself.

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Without noticing it, I had lost my fear of death. The grave was no longer a fabled place, but rather a dull zone beyond a gossamer-thin partition. Crossing that filmy divider would come in time; but for me, it no longer carried a gaudy, supercharged meaning. And for reasons I could not express, many matters seemed less important now, little busynesses. People I knew were more vital to me, and everything else was lesser, peripheral.

Except the work. I spent time on the patio, watching the classical space defined by the blue sea.

My calculations took only a few weeks. They have proved successful in the limited ways theory can affect the world. Yes, they do predict the particles found in recent Supercollider experiments. True, they are fully consistent with the four forces we already know. Gravity emerges as a manifestation of events in a ten-dimensional space-time.

One of the deeper implications is that there is another kind of time. In that system our truncated space-time forms a surface in the more general, superstring space-time. To that world, everything we perceive would seem like the surface of a soap bubble, wobbling in air. The bubble has no edge, no boundary — and so we will never, in that higher coordinate system, plunge through an abrupt juncture.

This implies that time, in the large sense, is never-ending. Of course it is not *our* time, but rather, the duration defined in higher spaces. The existence of this generalized time is perhaps the most startling deduction of the mathematics.

But what does this *mean*? We search for a completely unified theory, curling the fragmented forces of our hobbled universe into the Ur-Force. Still, even that is just a set of rules and equations.

What is it that breathes fire into the bare mathematics and makes a raw universe for them to describe? Now that we have achieved a unified model, we have in a sense answered the question first posed by the Greeks: *What* is the universe?

My answer is that we experience events in a higher dimension. Our perceived universe is the shadow of a higher realm.

Now we should turn to a grander issue: *Why* is the universe? To attack this question is to ask to know the mind of God.

Can we? In comparison with the worldview that emerges from our recent discoveries, our earlier catalog of four forces seems comfy, domes-

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ticated. Gravity looms large in the model I have constructed because, though it is the weakest of the four forces, its steady pull can cause matter to collapse in on itself to infinitesimal size.

This may mean that we will never know whether our theories work. How can they be checked? We cannot see down to the skimpy size of a superstring, after all.

Only the chilly beauty of mathematics can lead us. But where does this winding path go?

After all, we cannot even solve exactly for the motion of three bodies under Newton's theory of gravity. In my theory, *no* solutions are available for *any*thing.

So there is no certainty. Even the loveliest of all models give us, in the end, a set of equations. But now these squiggles describe events in higher realms, in vast vector spaces where imponderable entities move to their own differential waltzes.

This is profoundly far from the realm of humanity. Yet we who do this are, as I learned, comically human.

We theorists have our homes with a view, our sufficient incomes, our digital stereos and foreign cars, our harassed, ironic wives or husbands —and blithely seem to have solved the paradox of being thinking animals. But what compass do we have, we who swim in the backwash of passing, imperceptible ocean liners?

In Agra I rose at dawn to see the Taj Mahal. By that rosy first glow, it was as distant as a ghost.

It shimmered above the lush gardens, deceptively toylike until I realized how huge the pure curved white marble thing was. The ruler who built it to hold his dead wife's body had intended to build a black Taj also, across the river that lies behind. He would lie buried there, he planned, a long, arcing bridge linking the two of them.

But his son, seeing how much the first Taj cost, confined his father to a red sandstone fort a mile away for the last seven years of his life. When he was too feeble to sit up, the old man lay in bed and watched the Taj in a mirror until the end.

I realize this has not been the usual sort of annual address given to this body. Please do not mistake my odd approach as a sign of disrespect,

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however. I deeply thank the Nobel Committee.

I have tried to speak of the human experience of science, because we are all finally encased in our individual, truncated selves. If the work for which you have honored me seems to raise more issues than it solves, that is our condition. We contend endlessly against pale immensities.

We seem so small. Yet we have a common, perhaps arrogant impression that we matter, somehow.

There is an old philosopher's joke:

What is mind? It doesn't matter.
What is matter? Oh, never mind.

But consider the tiny processes governed by quantum mechanics. There matter is not inert. It is active, continually making choices between possibilities, following laws of probability. Mind is present, at least in the sense that nature makes choices.

Let us go one level higher, to our own brains. These fragile vessels amplify the quantum choices made in our heads by molecules. We apply the lever of size to underlying probabilistic events. We are magnifiers.

Now go to vaster scales. The universe itself shows some signs of design, at least in the choice of basic physical constants. If those numbers had come out differently, no life or even stable stars would be possible in the universe.

Or, in the light of my own calculations, consider the reality of other dimensions. Perhaps these dimensions are rolled up like tiny scrolls. Perhaps they simply lie beyond our knowing, except through the effects I have calculated. We do not know — yet.

Still, there emerges now evidence of mental processes at work on many levels of physical reality. We may be part of some larger act. For example, perhaps we contribute remotely to the universe's thinking about itself.

We probably cannot know this with anything approaching scientific certainty — ever. The recent work of myself and others suggests, though, that higher entities affect our times in distant but profound fashion.

The equations can only hint, imply, describe. They cannot tell us why.

I myself suspect that these besieged brains of ours matter. Somehow. Somewhere.

It is all very well, of course, to say that in some far dimension, time

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has no end. But it surely does for us individually, through shoot-outs and car crashes and disease.

Yet we are given a glimmer of perception, through the godly language of mathematics. Maybe, for creatures such as us, that is enough.

On the broad marble deck behind the Taj Mahal, the river ran shallow. To the right lay a bathing spot for Hindu devotees. Some splashed themselves with river water; others meditated. To the left was a mortuary. The better-off inhabitants of Agra had their bodies burned on pyres, then tossed into the river. If one could not afford the pyre, then, after a simple ceremony, the body was thrown off the sandstone quay and onto the mud flats, or into the water if the river was high. This was usually done in early morning.

By the glimmering dawn radiance, I watched buzzards pick apart something on the flats. They made quick work of it, deftly tearing away the cloth, and in five minutes had picked matters clean. They lost interest and flapped away. The Taj coasted in serene eternity behind me, its color subtly changing as the sun rose above the trees, its cool, perfect dome glowing, banishing the shadows below. Somehow in this worn, alien place, everything seemed to fit. Death just happened. From this simple fact came India's inertia. I thought of Mozart and heard a faint, light rhythm, felt myself skimming effortlessly over a rumpled brown dusty world of endless sharp detail and unending fevered ferment, and watched the buzzards and the bathers, and felt the slow, sad sway of worlds apart.

Coming Soon

Next month: Two very different and special stories are features. "A Can of Worms" by Ben Bova is a science fiction novelet about Sam Gunn (featured in "Diamond Sam" November 1988). "Icicle Music" by Michael Bishop is a Christmas fantasy, a bit early for the season but no less fascinating for that.

The November issue is on sale October 1. Or send us the coupon on page 220.

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Here is a rare item: a short story by F&SF's resident critic. What's more, it's a tale that might be described as sword-and-sorcery, though much darker and more intense than most of this genre. Algis Budrys has of course been in almost every issue of F&SF since 1975, but not often with fiction. His first F&SF story goes back to December 1960, the classic "Rogue Moon."

What Befell Mairiam

By Algis Budrys

THE INFINITE PASTURES of the terrible Kanagai hordes lie beyond the western mountains, and no civilized person knows much of what goes on there, except it is said the winter storms are unrelenting and the Kanagai women give birth in litters at the solstice, seven brothers and one girl.

East of the mountains, the Grand Duchy of Tharfydd at this time claimed sovereignty in the name of the Herring Monarch, saying its rule extended westward from the shores of the New Sea to the foothills. This is a marge whose width is four days' ride, given flat ground and military horses, which rarely occurs. For Kanagai in tumult on their fervid beasts, it might be somewhat less. But in any case the Grand Dukes of Tharfydd preferred the life and conversation of the coastal cities, considering their backs well protected and preferring to tot up the fat barques wallowing into their gull-speckled harbors. It was also true that the women of those cities bred and cultivated themselves for beauty, and vied with one another in the elaborations of love.

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So the stoney lands between the coastal vales and the mountains show traces of abandoned forts and farmsteads, and occasional dour villages clustered around the infrequent wells, but things occur as local circumstances demand and the law of Tharfydd is a joke. Half-wild goats wander the land, in the care of half-wild dogs and harassed by half-wild dogs. Even the normally intelligent persons there do not practice reading and writing, no particular day of rest is observed, and the markets are niggardly and monotonous.

Down from the Wolfthroat, the only pass through the mountains, runs a washed-out road between bitter bushes. For a day's ride, it parallels the river named Shallow. There the river pauses, pools, and then meanders in rivulets northward, losing itself in peastoned gulches. There is a village, with an inn built against the three remaining walls of a disused stronghold.

This is as far as any Tharfydd patrol has come in memory, and that not recent. The inn serves travelers on the south-north caravan track across the jut of the New Peninsula. Those travelers are not frequent. The invention of tacking through headwinds has made more practical a sea passage between the coastal cities.

Down the Wolfthroat road came a rider from the mountains, at first a small and vague silhouette against the westering sun, proving as he steadily approached the inn to be a short, thick-bodied man in old leather and metal astride a wearied bay, followed just beyond a stone's throw by a lean, panting yellowish dog of moderate size and narrow jaws. The dog walked as though its ribs had recently suffered a severe blow.

The man dismounted stiffly and handed his reins to the yardboy while the loungers at an outdoor table assessed his scuffed, water-warped boots, his cross-wrapped leggins in the old style, the hang of the plain belt and scabbards around the waist of his greased shirt, and the scars on the metal plates thonged to it. His black eyes peered sharply out from under a mottled iron cap with a flat nosepiece. His beard and moustaches were grizzled black, the skin of his cheeks was burned fresh red over deep-seated tan, and there was dust sweated darkly into every crease of his face.

He spoke to the yardboy in the demotic speech of commoners, which is naturally graceless. Even so, the boy's eyes widened at his growl: "Is there a farrier?"

When the boy nodded, the man said: "Rub down the horse while you give it some forage and water — a little water, and not much forage — and

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then have it reshod for speed. When that's done, stable it and give it some more forage — no grain at all — and a little more water. It will obey you. It knows what's good for it."

The horse turned its hanging head and looked at the man. Then it snorted through bloody nostrils and walked away with the boy.

The man stood at the low stone coping of the inn well, ignoring the loungers. He cranked up a bucket of water, doffed his cap, and poured the bucket over his head, holding his mouth open to the stream. He gulped twice, loudly, and then clamped shut his lips, working his neck to let water pour into his shirt front and back. He tossed the bucket back into the well, resumed his cap with his hair glossed down over his brows and his close-set ears, suddenly bent and snatched up a stone, whirled, and shied it across the inn yard at the dog, which danced silently aside. The man went into the inn, and the dog sank down in the shade of a stone fence. It lay with its forepaws out, belly in the dirt, watching the doorway.

THE COMMON room was dark, cool, furnished with rough tables and benches as you'd expect, and decorated with peeled frescoes of Grand Duke Tobot, The Ambitious, hunting bison beyond the mountains. It was overseen by the innkeeper, a thin and paunchy man with an obsequious lower lip. He served braised goat and a sort of beer in hardwood utensils. The man from the Wolfthroat drew out the pouch that had been briefly visible hanging at his neck, rummaged meticulously in it with his gloved fingertips, and forked out two barely legible coin pieces. Then he tied up the pouch, dropped it down his shirt, and sat back against the wall, spooning stew under his moustaches.

"Bound for the coast?" the innkeeper asked, thumbing the coins and putting them away under his apron.

"Following a wagon and outriders. Going to Thartis, probably," the man said, naming one of the principal cities. "Owner of the wagon told me she'd come from there." He ate another mouthful, wiped his lips on the underside of a sleeve, and asked: "Passed through here this morning, perhaps? Eastbound, bit of a hurry?"

"Yes, I recall such an equipe," the innkeeper said.

"One would, in this metropolis. Did they stop here?"

"They watered the horses. At the river."

"Didn't come in? Not even for warm goatmeat? Didn't get out of the

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wagon? Closed wagon, recall now; wooden slats on the windows, curtains behind the slats, perhaps a flash of movement — Blue eyes?"

"I recall the wagon. Scarlet paint with gilt filigree. I saw nothing move within." The landlord refreshed the man's beer from a pottery crock, using a measured ladle. "On the house," he said. "There was a woman in the wagon? Strange she didn't want to at least use the comforts."

The man smiled briefly. "Ah, well, Mairiam might prefer behind a rock to your privy. No offense meant. Some persons have one idea of fastidious, and others another."

"No offense taken," the landlord muttered and moved away, taking his crock with him. The man from Wolfthroat leaned against the wall and belched softly, folding his hands over his belly, listening with one ear cocked to the sounds of the farrier going about his business in the shed beyond the inn wall. The innkeeper bustled about the firepit in the center of the room, peering ruminatively into the stewpot on its iron crane. Then he retrieved the beer crock from its nest of wet rags and moved to carry it outside to the loungers, one of whom had called in through the door.

"This wagon," the man said without seeming to open his eyes. "Do you recall that it passed through here some days previous, bound for the Wolfthroat?"

The innkeeper frowned deeply. "It may have, now you mention it."

"And the lady didn't alight on that occasion? Didn't ask for what might be told her about the Wolfthroat? It's a place of rumor and speculation, and not much hard fact, I'd think. I would expect her to go there as forearmed as possible. What did you villagers tell her? What words did you produce when she turned those eyes upon you, my lord of this fruitful demesne?"

"You have a rough manner, sir," the landlord said, and took his beer outside.

The afternoon wore on. The man dozed against the wall, left hand in right across his waist. Occasionally his moustaches twitched, and faint snores were abruptly cut off; the eyes flickered open, then closed, and snoring resumed. In about the length of time it might take a good horse to recover half a night's performance for a pitiless master, the man stood up.

"Innkeeper!"

"I am outside, sir."

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"Call your boy. I'm ready to pay him for the care of my mount." The man moved toward the doorway, dangling the pouch from his left hand.

"Certainly, sir. He's going to fetch it now."

"Excellent," the man said dryly, stepping through the doorway and seeing the loungers facing him in a semicircle. The landlord slipped behind him and inside, flung the door shut, and barred it. "Good fortune on your journey, sir!" he called from within.

"Ah, well," the man remarked, turning his gaze on the six or seven men, and particularly on the tall, bright-cheeked young one with the shock of whitish-yellow hair, who had broad shoulders, long arms, a certain air about him, and a genuine sword in his hand, whereas the others had cudgels and short blades.

"I like your horse," the young man said. "Better than you do. And I think I might like your pouch. As for the rest of you, I can't say I care much about it." He stepped forward. "I'm reckoned a fair swordsman. You're no novice. Care to try it?"

The man from the Wolfthroat clapped his scabbard to his thigh with his left forearm, flourishing the coin-pouch in his hand. As the young man's eyes followed it, he drew and slashed the blond bravo's belly backhanded. He wiped the tip of his sword clean on his leggin and sheathed it. The young man stood there holding his guts in his arms.

"Was it the blue eyes?" his killer asked him, shouldering through the gape-mouthed onlookers. "Or was it truly just my worldly goods? Boy! Horse!" The young man fell without reply, lying face down with his knees drawn up and his buttocks high, his hands under him and his breaths pluming up delicate puffs of dust. He breathed shallowly, all his actions marked by a desperate restraint, as if he hoped he just might heal before everything had quite run out of him.

The boy brought the horse, staring with intense curiosity at the evolutions of the lounger's dying, barely nodding as he felt the coin being pressed into his palm. While the horse stood still, the man examined each of its hooves and the saddle-cinching. "When you see his breeches stain, he's dead," he remarked to the boy while mounting. "Not before. Never believe in a dead enemy with a tight arse."

"Thank you, sir."

The inn door was jerked open. "You've killed my elder son, you conscienceless murderer!" the landlord cried.

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The man shrugged. "Unless there's more luck than it warrants, we're all dead already. The Kanagai bison-riders will soon discover that the way to the coast is open."

"Phaw! We'll see no Kanagai here! Not as long as the immortal warlock of the Wolfthroat wears his iron ring of marriage to the Earthmother!"

The rider tugged off his left glove and held up his scabbed, ringless hand with the third finger hacked off. "I am Kalalak of the Wolfthroat, who was a warlock," he uttered, and rode away. The dog waited a safe interval, then followed after.

The equipe of Mairiam Wondrous, descended from Tobot, lay encamped in the first of the coastal vales, a day's ride and more yet from Thartis. Moonlight silvered the poplars. Picketed at the edge of a turf, the outriders' horses and the wagon geldings grazed and dozed. In the center of the clearing, near a glowing fire, stood the scarlet wagon. An outrider slept on the ground at either end. It could be assumed the other four retainers were posted as sentries and were in ambuscade.

From within the wagon came the soft sound of a lute, and a clear voice like sweet birds calling in the distance, singing such songs as

She walks in sorrow through the night.
Her tears all gently flow.
She walks in sorrow through the night
and thinks on the long ago.
Her father's house is closed to her.
Her mother's eyes are cold.
She walks in sorrow through the night
and thinks on the stranger bold.
In manor halls and palaces,
in the tavern in the town,
they speak behind their hands and laugh
at the maid in the sullied gown.
The maid in the sullied gown.
And she who was her county's hope
is now the shame of the town.

and other such trifles as civilized ladies enjoy recounting after an eve-

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ning meal. And finally, with a little laugh, Mairiam sang

There was a warlock on a hill.
Hey nonny, nonny lo.
There was a warlock on a hill.
He lived in a palace that a horse could fill.
If he weren't dead, he'd live there still.
Hey nonny, nonny ho.

There was a warlock very old.
Hey nonny, nonny lo.
There was a warlock, very old,
who'd come to wonder if his wife was cold
and took the word of a lady bold.
Hey nonny, nonny ho.

Adultery's a chancy thing.
Hey nonny, nonny lo.
Adultery's a chancy thing,
but luscious the pleasures it can bring,
and what's the weight of a wedding ring!
Hey nonny, nonny ho.

There was a lady with a will.
Hey nonny, nonny lo.
There was a lady with a will
to cozen the warlock on his hill.
She took the ring and she wears it still.
Hey nonny, nonny ho!

The old lands lie beyond the sea.
Hey nonny, nonny lo.
The old lands lie beyond the sea
and there they guard a treasury
that the warlock's ring consigns to me!
Hey nonny, nonny ho ho ho!
Hey nonny, nonny ho!

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* * *

Up on the edge of the vale, with his horse standing spraddle-legged and headhung behind him, Kalalak twitched his moustaches in the shadows.

The dog came up through the leaves and tugged at a leggin strap. Kalalak kicked at it and the dog scampered away, but it came back again and yet again. Finally Kalalak said thoughtfully: "All right," at which the dog led him, both of them silent, from sentry to hidden sentry. There in each case Kalalak's short blade did its work until finally only the two sleepers at the wagon remained.

At the edge of the open glade, Kalalak paused. The wagon now sat silent, its interior showing only the traces of a nightlight, the singing having ended and the singer having presumably composed herself for sleep. He waited a while longer; death in his experience left an alarming wake that took some time to settle, and death at all compass points must be especially pervasive. But neither of the guards stirred more than was normal, and the wagon did not alter its appearance of repose. This equanimity he attributed to the dewfall. Had the air been less muffled, it might have been needful to set upon both outriders at once, creating great shocks certain to hinder easy ingress to the wagon.

The dog waited with him. Kalalak was better disposed toward it now, but still it remained out of sword's reach, contenting itself with keeping its eyes on the pouch, which bulged under Kalalak's shirt in the moonlit patch upon his thick and gently stirring chest.

When the time had become appropriate, Kalalak moved across the glade and twice more employed his knife. He placed it with tender accuracy, so that the two sleepers easily exchanged their own small dreams for the one great one. Then he shifted to the other side of the campfire, where he squatted down and cleansed the blade, first with ashes and then with heat, and then with a last polish from a handful of ashes before returning it to its sheath. When he rose and walked steady-footed to the front of the wagon, the dog came trotting up and took his place attentively.

With one hunch of his shoulders, Kalalak could be seen to spring to the footrest, his hand on the door latch, and with another he had pushed inside. Between the window slats, his shadow passed across the nightlight. The dog's ears pricked up.

In the lilting, loquacious structures of the language of nobility, Kalalak

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could be heard to say: "Here, then, my Mairiam, is a waking kiss for your untroubled brow."

There were small sounds within the wagon, and Mairiam then protested in a voice like a harbor gull: "I threw out certain parts of you for the dogs to find!"

"Oh, you did and find them they did. But the main thing is, when doing a mortal wounding, now — listen, now, my Mairiam, there's a good dear — one ought to reckon that some mortalities might throb to a slower pulse. You see? Even bereft, a body of that certain sort might yet rise for some little while, and veer about in search of efficacious resource to rape up. It would be that or dream eternally of having been a fool, wouldn't it, now?"

"Avaunt! With this ring, I stop your heart!"

"Ah, well, that you've done twice over already, once with your love and then with your blade. And you might with ring now have done it thrice, but the thing of it is, you see, darling, this heart now in my bosom here is no heart of mine. And it may never have learned the Tharfydd tongue in any case." But the dog whined softly, and a shiver rippled the freshly scarred fur over its ribs.

Kalalak could be heard to say: "And now I'll take back ring, and go home with my story of amends, pray may she grant it credence." After this, Mairiam made sounds that caused the dog to leap up foaming at the jaws, stiff-legged, its back hunched and its hackles risen enormously.

In due course, Kalalak emerged from the wagon and shut the door on Mairiam's repinings. He stepped down, smoothing the glove over his left hand, and gravely kissed the hilt of the knife. Then he threw the weapon far, far and spinning into the tops of the poplars, and some say the right person might yet find it there at a height in some bole, buried to the hilt and now overgrown.

Having done this, Kalalak approached the waiting hound, which was quivering greatly, and sank to his knees before it, opening his pouch with ceremony. "I thank you for your help with the sentries," he said. Then he shifted smoothly from the demotic into Tharfydd. "And I marvel at your stamina." But the dog gave no sign of surprise or that it understood, and Kalalak smiled at it with a certain wariness. "I think perhaps you might be the hedge-wizard Arara, of whom I've heard a tale or two. In that case, it's with some trepidation I return this to your attentions, considering what else of mine you've already converted to your own substance. But fair is fair."

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From the pouch, he took his severed finger with the band of squeezed and rusty flesh about it, and the narrow-jawed toothmarks just barely started upon it, several days old. He laid it before the dog, then ran a hand swiftly over its flanks while it was distracted. "How well you heal! But, then, you have been nourished as few creatures are. Yes, I think we shall meet again, unless I am properly cautious." He turned his head away from what the dog was doing now, and rose.

He hitched the geldings to the wagon and called his horse, which came down slowly, eying him. He unsaddled it and led it to the geldings.

He said to the horse: "You must now lead these and their mistress to Thartis." He clasped the horse once quickly about the neck. "And there you have my leave to die at last." The horse bared its teeth at him and jerked its head aside, but it nodded. As did Kalalak.

He called the sentries' horses, who came from the brush and stood before him shivering. He chose one, saddling it while it stood with downcast eyes, and the other three fled from the clearing in all directions but West, and that was the way Kalalak rode.

AT THE inn, he was cautiously received. Nevertheless, he went to the young man's grave and there he stood over it and removed his glove, revealing the ring on Mairiam's thumb grown smoothly into his hand in place of the finger. When the ground began to stir, he said to the distracted innkeeper: "He will not be much changed, but he will remember his interlude beneath the weight. It will make him more tractable, I think. You might appreciate that." And he rode to the Wolfthroat, steadily.

It may be that he sufficiently repaired the situation, for there are as yet no Kanagai in the East. As for the dog after Kalalak left him, that is another conte entirely, which I do not yet know well.

In Tharfydd, things go badly. All women are born ill-featured and stupid, and the sour nobles of Tharfydd go to their weddings with disdain.

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Lucius Shepard is the youngest contributor to this issue,but he has been writing fine stories for F&SF for exactly six years, including "Salvador" (April 1984) and "The Man Who Painted the Dragon Griaule" (December 1984). Except for its locomotive-like pace and impact, this new Shepard story about a horrifying train trip is somewhat atypical.

BOUND FOR GLORY

By Lucius Shepard

TRACY AND I HAD boarded at White Eagle, which is the next-to-last stop before the train enters the Bad Patch, and we had bought tickets clear through to Glory, where I had some friends who still trusted me enough — or so I hoped — to front me a loan. I has screwed things up proper in White Eagle, running my business into the ground and skating a thin line between plain failure and out-and-out fraud. And I had known that Tracy was getting ready to make a move, that she was fed up with our life. I expect that was why I had risked the ride to Glory — the prospect of losing his only support has driven many a man to desperation. The wonder of it was, I realized, that Tracy must have felt equally as desperate about her own prospects, otherwise she wouldn't have joined me. And I could not decide if this was a good thing or bad, that we were each other's last, best hope.

Somehow we had managed to convince ourselves that the trip was a golden opportunity, but seeing the drawn faces of our fellow passengers

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brought home what a starve-out proposition it really was. Neither of us wanted to let on we felt this way, however, so we smiled and held hands and pretended to be full of spit and determination. That was easy to do at first. The sun hung high in a notch between two mountains, gilding the snow and throwing indigo shadows from the firs, making a rare beauty out of the decline of day, and there was plenty of time to relax before we reached the Bad Patch, and the changes would begin.

Following behind the conductor as he collected tickets was Roy Cole, who was an institution on the line. Cole was in his late forties, rawboned, with salt-and-pepper hair and a seamed, tanned face whose dour expression was accentuated by a ridged scar that ran from the corner of his mouth along his jaw. He wore jeans and a loose black shirt, and cradled in his arms was a shotgun with silver filigree embellishing the stock. He stared at us as if searching for evidence of guilt. Which was more or less the case. The train made the trip only when Cole felt conditions were right, and since he knew better than anyone else the changes that could occur and the signs to look for, no one objected to his scrutiny. If you were going to change, your best chance for survival was that Cole could protect you. But when he fixed those black eyes on mine, their pupils as oddly configured as chess pieces, it felt as if my skeleton were getting ready to jump out of my flesh and run for the door at the end of the car. I wanted to ask whether or not I was going to undergo a change; but before I could work up the courage, he had moved on and was examining yet another passenger.

For the first hour, the ride was uneventful. Sunset was a sweep of burnt orange above the western peaks, with lavender and a sprinkle of stars higher up; the snow crystals in the air were fired and flurrying like swarms of live jewels, and the glow shined up the tumble of Tracy's black hair, put a gloss on the beauty of her face, which was something special under even ordinary light — with its fine bones and sad eyes, like the face of a troubled angel. And as we passed into the flat country, I felt that we had left the bad times behind and were alive only to the good parts of what had been. We talked some about our plans, but mostly we reminisced about our days in White Eagle; from the way we laughed and hugged each other, you might have thought we were newlyweds, and not two losers on the run from fate.

"'Member Gordon?" I asked Tracy. "That ol' boy rode a sorrel mare; you used to say he looked like he was always poutin'? Well, back 'fore we

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got together, this tent show come to town."

"Doctor Teague's Medicine Show," Tracy said, and I replied, Yes, yes, now I thought of it, I believed that *had* been its name.

"Anyway," I went on, "they had these monkeys. Chimpanzees. And the word was, the owner would pay fifty bucks to anyone who could whup one of 'em. Wellsir, ol' Gordon considered himself a helluva fighter. It wasn't just he thought he was good at it; he thought it was a noble pursuit. Once, I 'member we were drunk, and he got this faraway look and says to me, 'Ed,' he says, 'y'know, fightin' ain't just rollin' 'round in the dirt and gettin' bloody. It's the purest form of physical 'spression there is.'"

Tracy giggled.

"So the thing was, when Gordon heard 'bout the monkeys, 'bout how they could whup any man, he was first in line to give 'er a try. He felt he was upholdin' the pride of all mankind." I chuckled. "Lemme tell ya, it was pitiful. There was this little pen with a dirt floor they fought in; and Gordon, he's bouncin' up and down on the balls of his feet, throwin' left jabs at the air; and the monkey, he's just squattin' in the dirt, starin' at Gordon like he never seen such a fool. Finally Gordon gets frustrated 'bout the monkey not doin' nothin', so he steps up and wings a roundhouse right" — I demonstrated — "aimin' for the monkey's head. That's all it took to get the monkey goin', 'cause the next y'know, it's all over Gordon. I mean, it happened so damn fast, it was a blur. One second the monkey's windmillin' its arms at Gordon's chest, and a second later Gordon's lyin' facedown, and the monkey's jumpin' up and down on his back and snatchin' out handfuls of his hair."

"Oh my God!" said Tracy, laughing so hard that she started to cough.

"Gordon just wouldn't accept defeat," I went on. "After we'd got him patched up and he had a few drinks, he starts talkin' 'bout it ain't fair a man's gotta fight a beast without there bein' some kinda handicap imposed. A human bein's bone structure, he said, wasn't as strong as a monkey's, and if he'd had some protection, it wouldn'ta been no contest — he woulda kicked the monkey's butt 'cause his manner of fightin' was scientifically superior. So next day he goes to see Ben Krantz and gets him to carpenter up a helmet out of wood and leather that's got bars across the face and paddin' inside. Then he heads back down to the tent show and demands another crack at the monkey." I shook my head in dismay. "This time it was even worse. Starts out the same, with Gordon bouncin' 'round

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and the monkey squattin' and givin' him this look that says, Fool. Then, 'fore Gordon can even throw a punch, the monkey jumps up, rips the helmet off Gordon's head, and goes to poundin' on him with it, smashin' the damn thing to pieces over his skull."

We collapsed against one another, laughing. I don't suppose the story was all that amusing, but we needed laugher, and we milked the moment for every ounce. I was glad Tracy could manage it, because, under the best of circumstances, she was not a happy woman. She had been raped by her daddy when she was just out of pigtails, and that had set her up for a string of disastrous relationships. She had told me more than once that I was the first man she'd been with who hadn't beat her, and I thought her feelings for me were less genuine attachment than relief. She had come to depend on men in an unhealthy way, to use their mastery as an excuse for not striving to better herself; I guess she figured it was easier to let someone keep her down than to face up to what she was becoming. Or maybe it was just that men had made her feel like that. Though I liked to see myself as being an improvement for her, I knew that I was only the latest in a line of masters, that my uses of her — disguised as love — were crueler than bruises in their deceit, and would likely cause her more grief in the long run. Yet knowing this hadn't persuaded me to let her go; I told myself that if I did, she would just find someone else to misuse her. And, too, there was something that I refused to admit to myself — that I enjoyed the dominance. While I had my charitable moments, I was at heart a taker, a wielder of power; the problem was that I had no power to wield except where Tracy was concerned. And I believe the most compelling reason that I clung to her was fear. But I was expert at denying that knowledge. My most successful form of denial was holding out the hope that beneath the layers of falsity, there was something real, an ember of love, or at least honest emotion, that — given a little wind to puff it alight and some kindling — would warm us for the rest of our lives.

"Maybe," she said, coming up for air, "maybe the monkey's how come Gordon was always poutin'."

"Could be," I said. "It's for sure he never did get over it. He'd talk 'bout the monkey like it was some sorta legendary hero . . . a great man whose like'd never come our way again. He was a funny ol' boy, that Gordon."

The train was pulling into Lorraine, a collection of shacks gathered around a couple of larger frame buildings, a hotel and one that housed

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an assay office and a general store. Beyond the town the terrain was rolling, snow-covered, with a few golden rectangles of winter wheat glowing in the decaying light, and beyond the wheat, beyond the Spring Hills, whose sheer granite faces showed slate blue, lay a dark haze that signaled the beginning of the Patch. Seeing it sobered us, and we sat for a minute or two in silence.

"We should get off," Tracy said dully. "Lorraine's far enough from White Eagle."

"You know that ain't so," I told her. "'Sides, won't nobody here lend me money."

"I can always go back to whorin'."

I was startled by the defeated tone in her voice. "You can't do that."

"Ain't much different'n what I do with you."

That angered me, and I refused to respond.

"What's the point?" she said. "We go here; we go there — we still the same people."

I started to speak, but she cut me off.

"And don't go sayin' you gonna turn over a new leaf! I can't remember how many times you promised. . . ."

"I ain't the only one who's got bad habits they can't cure."

That stopped her a moment. Like me, she knew our union was a comfortable trap, that its comforts were a guarantee nothing better would come along for either of us.

"I still don't see the point," she said. "If we ain't gonna do nothin' different, what's the matter where we end up?"

"Well, go on, then," I said. "Go ahead: get off. You just go and be a whore in Lorraine, if that's what you think's right. But I don't wanna see it."

She bowed her head, watched her hands clasping and unclasping in her lap. I could tell the crisis had passed.

"Why'd you wanna come?" I asked. "You knew there'd be risk."

"I reckon I thought takin' a chance might be like magic or somethin', and we might come through it better off than we was. I know it sounds stupid. . . ."

"Naw, it don't."

She looked up at me. "Why'd *you* wanna do it?"

"Pretty much the same reason," I lied.

I pulled her into an embrace. Her hair smelled of lavender, and her

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breasts crushed against me. I touched them on the sly. They were firm and full, and just the thought of them would make me steamy. I felt the heat stirring in her by the way she arched against my hand. Then she drew back and pushed my hand away; her eyes were filling.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She shook her head, but I suspected she was thinking how pitiful it was that the good thing we made with our bodies had so little vital truth behind it, as if it were just a clever trick we could perform.

The whistle sounded high and forlorn, and as the train lurched into motion, a fat woman in a black cloth coat with a fur collar half-staggered, half-dropped into the seat across the aisle.

"Goodness!" she said, and beamed at us. "That 'un almost threw me back into Culver County, it did." She flounced about, settling the folds of her coat; she was wearing white gloves that made her hands appear tiny in contrast to the voluminous sleeves from which they emerged. And her feet, too, appeared tiny, like a child's feet stuck onto swollen ankles and bloated, black-stockinged calves. Her pasty chins trembled with the motion of the train. Eyes like currants stuck in the dough of her cheeks, and a Cupid's bow of a mouth painted cherry red. Looking at her, I had the notion that she was an immense pastry come to life, her veins filled not with blood but with custard cream. She leaned toward us, bringing with her a wave of cloying perfume, and said, "This your first trip, ain't it? I always can tell. Now, don't worry — it ain't so bad as you heered. I mean, it's bad; I won't deny that. But it's tolerable." She heaved a sigh, causing the wrinkles in her coat to expand like a balloon plumping with gas. "Know how many times I crossed?"

"How many?" said Tracy, and by the edge in her voice, I knew she was put off by the fat woman.

"Thirty-two," said the woman proudly. "This'll make thirty-three. I 'spect you find that curious, but when you get my age" — she tittered —"and you love cookin' much as I do, and ain't no man in your life, you gotta find somethin' to take your mind off the lonelies. Guess you might say travelin' the Patch is my hobby. When I started, I was kinda low — I didn't much care whether I made it to the far side or not. But it 'pears I'm immune to the changes like Cole." She hauled a leather-bound diary out of her purse. "So I keep a record of the trips. I figger someday it might be valuable to some explorer or something." She shook her head in wonder-

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ment. "The things I seen, you just wouldn't believe it."

I was unsettled by the idea of anyone traveling through the sickness and dark of the Patch for fun, but the look on Tracy's face was one of pure disgust. She turned to the window, wanting no part of the conversation. The lights came on inside the car, bathing us in a sickly yellow glow.

"It's a horrid place," the woman said. "But it's a mystery, and things that's mysterious, they gotta beauty of their own. 'Course" — she adopted a haughty expression — "it ain't the mystery to me it once was. I 'spect I know more 'bout it than anybody 'cept Cole."

I couldn't help being curious about her experiences; it would have been unnatural not to be after having lived near the Patch for all those years. Like everybody else, I'd heard the stories of how it came to be: how Indian wizards had been warring, and stray magic had transformed a stretch of land that cut straight across the country. And how it had been fiery stuff falling from a comet that had done the trick, and how it was a section of Hell surfaced from under the earth. The stories all differed on the origins of the Patch, but were unanimous as to its nature: a place where everything changed, where things out of nightmares appeared, where time and possibility converged.

I asked the woman what she knew concerning the beginnings of the Patch, and she said, "This fella I know claims the Patch is like that place out East where you can see seven states from the top of a peak . . . 'cept, it ain't states you see from the Patch; it's worlds. Hundreds of 'em, all packed in together. He claims that with all the pressures on the Patch, it give way like how a dam will, and the worlds got all mixed together."

I favored the story about Indian wizards, but I said, "Uh-huh."

"It don't really matter, though," said the woman. "Things is how they is, and knowin' why they got that way don't change diddley."

Tracy was looking strained, and I decided to change the subject. "You been livin' in Lorraine awhile, have you?" I asked the woman.

"I moved there once't I started ridin' the train. 'Fore that, I was over in Steadley for a number of years."

Steadley was a large silver-mining community on the other side of the Patch, and if I'd had a proper stake, that would have been my destination, and not Glory. "'S'posed to be world of opportunity in Steadley," I said.

"Yes, indeed! A body can make hisself a fortune . . . if he's got the will and the wherewithal. That where you headin'?"

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"I got plenty of will," I told her. "But I'm a bit shy of the wherewithal. We bound for Glory. I'm hopin' I can get a stake there."

She clucked her tongue in sympathy. "Ain't that the way of it — when you get a bushel of 'taters, that's when you run outta stew meat." She shot me a coy look. "Y'know, I bet there's folks in Steadley who'd be willin' to help out a young fella like yourself. God knows, they do enough for the refugees."

"Refugees from the Patch, you talkin' 'bout?"

She nodded. "They pitiful devils, the ones that make it out."

"I hear there a lotta trouble with refugees . . . on the train, I mean."

"Lord, yes! Ain't been a trip when some don't try and board."

"I don't wanna hear 'bout it," said Tracy, but the woman made a gesture of dismissal.

"Your man'll protect you, hon," she said. "But them refugees, they *can* be fearsome. More'n fearsome. They can freeze your heart."

"Stop it," said Tracy, her voice tight.

"Yes, Lord" — the woman's tone was exultant — "when they come a-boilin' through the doors, bringin' all that foul air and magic with 'em, and it 'pears they grinnin', 'cause their lips is drawn back to show their teeth, they so desperate, and you can feel the power clawin' at em. . . ."

"Stop it!" Tracy shrilled. "You must stop, y'hear?"

Startled, I glanced at her. She was gaping at the woman. Shivering, transfixed by some sight or feeling. Her cheeks were hollowed, her eyes were aswarm with crazy lights; they looked like broken glass scattered on black velvet. It was her eyes as much as anything that made me realize we must have entered the Patch, that the changes had begun.

"Tracy?" I said, confused, reluctant to touch her for fear I'd disrupt the tension that was holding her together.

"You can't help but feel it," the woman went on, showing her teeth in a manner redolent of the poor souls she'd just finished describing. "It comes off 'em like the stink from an open grave. Sometimes their flesh just starts to saggin' off their bones, and sometimes —"

"Hey," I said to her. "Leave it be, will ya?"

"Won't be long now 'fore we see 'em," she said, pointing out at the smoky blue twilight and the snow. "Sometimes their faces gets to glowin' like dead fish bellies, their teeth turn black and drop out, and they grow old right 'fore your eyes. They feel the strength ebbin' from 'em, and they

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go to their knees and pluck at ya with hands shrunk to skin and bones, and they beg for help in languages you can't understand . . . devil languages. Their cheeks bulge, and the gut strings come out of their mouths. They try and push 'em back in, but the stuff keeps on eelin' out."

Tracy was shouting, and the woman's face reddened and looked to be bloating, folding in on itself like a rotten apple; her white-gloved hands gripped the armrest, and she spat out the words as if they were poisoned daggers. I pushed Tracy back and told the woman to shut up, but she only got louder, her imagery viler. The pictures she conjured made me shrivel inside, and I was tempted to hit her. I think I might have, but then the door of the car opened, and Cole stepped in. He walked slowly down the aisle and stopped beside us, letting his shotgun angle down to cover the woman's breast. She stared wide-eyed at the double barrels and fell silent.

"'Pears you havin' some trouble, Marie," he said in a voice like iron.

"Naw," she said weakly. "Naw, I just. . . ."

"Way you gettin' all puffed up and red-faced," he said, "sure seems to me like you 'bout to change. How you feel? Little shaky inside . . . like maybe somethin's shiftin' 'round in there?"

He cocked one barrel, burning her with those weird black eyes, and she froze with her pouty red mouth open, one hand to her throat; a whistly guttering of breath came from her throat.

"Naw, Cole," she said, putting real effort into sounding out the words. "I'm all right, I swear. You must can see that; you gotta know I'm —"

"You fuckin' sow," Cole said, "I'm 'bout sick to death of you scarin' my passengers. You don't shut your hole, I promise you, I'm just gon' assume you changin', and blow your heart out through your damn spine. Ain't a soul who'd blame me for it." He pushed the shotgun into the pillowy softness of her breast, and worked it about as if fitting it into a socket. "Don't you reckon I can get away with murder?"

"Please, Cole," she whispered.

"You gon' leave these good people 'lone?"

Her eyelids fluttered down, and she nodded.

Cole made a disgusted noise, but he lowered the hammer. His eyes swung toward me; the scar along his jaw bunched like a sidewinder. "Keep your gun in reach, friend," he said. "There's gon' be trouble in this car. Do the best you able, and if I can get back to you, I will."

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Then he set out along the aisle. I went after him and caught up as he was about to enter the next car.

"Tell me what's goin' on!" I said, grabbing his arm.

He nailed me with a fierce stare. "Take it easy, friend."

"You don't advise a man to keep his gun handy without sayin' why."

"I figgered it was obvious why." He pulled me toward the door, away from the rest of the passengers. The window beside us was sectioned into four narrow panes, and each one enclosed a rectangle of blue darkness with a single star low in the right-hand corner, like a block of mystical postage stamps. It was such a symmetrical configuration, so subtly improbable, it made me realize how at sea I was.

"This gon' be a bad trip," Cole said. "I can't cover all the cars, so I'm leavin' you in charge of this 'un."

I was not eager for responsibility. "Why the hell you let 'em make the run when you knew things was gonna be bad?"

"Son, even if you could understand, I ain't got time to 'splain. Now, last time things was this bad, I lost me nine passengers. So I'll leave it up to you. You wanna help, or you just wanna watch it happen?"

"Tracy," I said, "the woman with me — is she gonna be . . . bad off?"

"Sometimes the changes ain't so bad, and you can get 'em through. But other times you gotta stop 'em. That's why I want you in charge here. Be better for everybody, you make that decision."

I touched my holstered pistol; it felt as snug and dry as a snake in a skull. "Naw," I said. "Naw, I couldn't do nothin' to her. And I ain't no good with a gun, anyhow."

"I'm gon' be busy," Cole said. "Whatever happens here, it's your call."

I studied his weathered face, his strange eyes, wondering if he was telling me everything. He met my stare without any dodgery. The rattle and rush of the train seemed to be registering the tension between us, and all the violent acceleration of our lives. I had a strong sense of his character, and I saw that while the job had tied black twists in his soul, he was neither particularly good nor evil, neither courageous nor fearful, just a man who had reached a difficult pass that was half his own making, and half the sorry luck that comes with being born; he was simply doing what he could to get along. Knowing that he was like me, a man with no special magic or destiny, gave me confidence in him. And in myself. I'd never had to use my gun against another man. But now I thought I could.

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"What I gotta do?" I asked him.

"There'll be refugees," he said. "Always is. They'll try and board a few hours from now, this place where the train slows on a steep grade. Don't ask no questions if they get inside. Just kill 'em. And don't waste your bullets." He inspected my gunbelt. "See that squarehead back in the corner?"

He indicated a middle-aged, gray-suited blond man with a brooding Scandinavian face, and told me to keep an eye on him. And on Tracy. The remaining seven were an elderly woman in a green print dress, and six dirt farmers — gloomy, roughly dressed men who had lost their holdings in a land grab and were hoping for a new start.

"Anything else happens," Cole said, "you'll see it comin'. The Patch changes some for the worse, some hardly at all. Others like me and that fat bitch Marie and you — this trip, anyway — it lets 'em see clear how bad things are for the rest. I don't know which way's the more merciful. I come to see so damn much, I wish I was blind sometimes." He squared his shoulders and settled his shotgun under his arm. "Luck to you," he said.

I PACED ALONG the aisle, dismayed by Tracy, who was gone into some kind of fugue. And what I saw out the train window made me fear for what I might see later inside the car. Once we passed a way station, an island of brilliance in the dark where sat a wooden building with a peaked roof and a peculiar bright white light stuck high on a pole above a loading platform; ranked beside the platform were rows of human figures wrapped in gray cloth, like rows of mummies. Then we hurtled past a snowy street lined by round stone buildings with glowing signs floating above them, spelling out words in a script I could not read. Then there was a time when all I could see were thousands of lights ranging the darkness; we were traversing a smooth section of rail, and the noise of the wheels had dwindled to a rushing sound, and it was as if I were traveling on a schooner under a strong wind, sailing along a jeweled coast.

More and more I came to regret my decision of risking the ride to Glory. All my life I had made the wrong or the too-hasty decision, and while I had chalked this up to bad luck, now I understood it was a matter of weak character . . . or rather, of a strong character half-formed, one whose strength was enough to utilize the power it had, but not strong enough to seize power for itself. As a result, I was always leaping from

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one fix to another, reacting to trouble like a scalded cat, and it struck me as odd that I hadn't seen it until now. Maybe, I thought, this was an instance of the clarity that Cole had said came to some who traveled through the Patch; but most likely it was just that I'd reached the bottom of my possibilities, and all that was left me was to look back up and observe how I'd managed to fall so far.

At first I kept a close eye on the Swede and Tracy; soon, though, I began to relax, thinking that Cole must have overstated the danger just to make me stay alert. But then the Swede came to his feet, clasping his hands to his head, moaning, a hideous noise that issued from the black O of his mouth like half a dozen voices all sounding the same tormented bass note. His fingers appeared unnaturally long, and, to my horror, I realized they were growing longer yet, curving to encase the sides of his head like the bars of a birdcage. His face, too, was elongating, becoming a caricature of Swedish despondency. Glints in his eyes flickered like lantern flames, talons were sprouting from his nails, and his white skin had pebbled like that of a lizard. Seeing this, my guts clenched, and I was too stunned to move.

Screams, and the passengers began crawling over the seats toward the front of the car. One of the farmers — a red-faced, round-bellied fool in overalls — made a grab for the Swede as he staggered past, and the Swede raked him with his hooked fingers and tore the flesh off the side of his face. That shocked me from my funk, and I drew and fired. The gun felt alive in my hand, its kick like a natural muscular reaction, not the uncontrollable spasm that usually resulted when I took target practice. The bullet spread a fan of blood across the Swede's shirt and drove him back, but didn't knock him off his feet. He came forward again, moaning in that demon voice. I punched out his left eye with one round, shattered his jaw with another. That dropped him to his knees, his features a mask of shattered bone and gore. I fed three more bullets into the chamber, and, half-deafened by the reports, I emptied the gun into his head and belly. And that did for him. His shirt had caught fire from the last round, pale flames leaping merrily, and his skin began to char. The blood flowing from his gut was purplish, darker than the rest; it congealed almost immediately, lumping up like gelatin.

Gunfire came from the adjoining car; the passengers surged forward in a panic. But I forced them back, and had a couple of farmers tie up Tracy,

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using a coil of rope that was part of their baggage. She made no objection, just stared out the window, refusing to answer when I asked her how she felt — or maybe she didn't hear. Her eyes were black as bullet holes; muscles leaped in her jaw. It hurt me to see her trussed up, yet I was terrified of her. I kept picturing the Swede staggering along the aisle, spitting blood and fury. Marie caught my eye, triumph in her expression; she began scribbling in her book. I wanted to kill her, but I didn't have the juice to act.

The farmers dragged the bodies to the rear of the car as more gunfire came from up ahead. The train had slowed, chuffing up a steep grade; out the window I could see darkness, snow-laden pines, and stars aligned into unfamiliar constellations. Most of the passengers sat staring at their hands, praying or hoping for some mercy of the world to rain down. I gazed at Tracy, netted in rope, and didn't know whether the pain I felt was for her or for myself and the prospect of losing her. All the time we'd been together, I'd been able to persuade myself that I must love her some little bit anyway, that love was in me, buried under the topsoil of my character; yet now I wondered what it was I'd been calling "love." The comfort of sex, the security of having a shoulder to cry on, childish dependencies, strident needs and whiny manipulations, and none of the generous emotions of a man. It seemed I could feel my life blow past me, like a train blowing past somebody gawking from a weedy embankment, just that — life — just a fast freight, a streak of darkness with a hot wind behind; and you barely saw what it was before it was by, and only too late did you understand all the different ways you could have fleshed it out, all the things you could have noticed and savored. And at the end, if you were lucky, you might know the measure of your failure. One of the farmers began muttering, and I caught the words, "God, I'd give anything. . . ." So would I have given anything, but in exchange for what? A fiercer determination, no conscience to weaken my desire. Those weren't the sort of things a good man was supposed to want, and even if I could get past the moral rule, they were things weighed out from the dross of experience, which you couldn't pick up in a trade like you could with a gun or a pair of boots. Maybe, I thought, you could decide to love; maybe it was simply an act of will, one I'd never chosen to make. Well, I chose to make it now, and though I was more wishing than choosing, crossing my fingers and whistling in the dark, I swore I would try to protect Tracy beyond the limits with which I'd fenced in my heart.

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About halfway up the grade, I forced myself to examine her. She was smiling — a fixed, insane smile — and as I watched, a black trickle leaked from the corner of her mouth; she flicked out a long, slender tongue, crimson and rough, and licked it clean. Her skin had grown white, pulpy-looking, and was rippling under her dress; when she flexed her fingers, straining at her bonds, they appeared either boneless or many-jointed.

"Aw Jesus!" I said, backing away, and Marie squealed, "Kill 'er, for God's sakes!"

I eased my gun out and held it with the muzzle up. The skin of my face thrummed, as if covering hot wires instead of muscle and bone.

"She's all right," I said.

One of the farmers, a heavyset man with a shock of thick gray hair, wearing a threadbare corduroy jacket, said, "I can sympathize with you, but this ain't no time to be takin' chances."

I kept my eyes on Tracy, recalling her fire and stubbornness, the wild look she got when she wanted me; I didn't care then about any man.

"You can die, too, mister," I told the farmer. "Don't matter none to me."

One of the others started to sneak up behind me. I whirled about and trained the gun on his face.

"C'mon," I said. "Take another step."

Frustration turned to rage, and I yelled at them. "Just c'mon and see what I got for you! C'mon, now! What you waitin' for?"

They huddled together, anxious as horses scenting fire on the wind.

The heavyset farmer said, "Calm down, buddy."

I laughed at that, and gestured toward the rear of the car. "Get on back there! And don't you even think 'bout tryin' me!"

I herded them into the back with the bodies, then sat down across the aisle from Tracy. Her eyes had gone a blazing yellow; a membrane slid back and forth across them. The delicate lines bracketing her mouth, the finely etched crow's-feet — all the lines of her face had deepened, blackened; it looked as if her face were a mask that was about to crack into pieces and fall away.

"Tracy?" I said. "Y'hear me?"

She made a humming, growly noise in her throat. Her entire torso was rippling; the ropes were loosening. Her fingernails had turned dark blue, like death, death's color, dark blue. I had a flash of memory: the sight of her body naked in dawn light, rumpled sheets banked snowy around her,

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and her breasts gleaming and the soft curve of her belly — pure as the sweep of a spring meadow — planing down to the dark swatch of her secret hair. I felt dead inside, my thoughts like bitter smoke from a damped fire. I could feel the brimstone emptiness that the train was tunneling through, still grinding up the grade, and I wanted to throw back my head and howl.

"Tracy." I reached out to touch her, but couldn't bring myself to complete the gesture. Her skin, I thought, would be moist, her flesh a cold tumescence like the flesh of a tomato worm. The ropes were getting more slack by the second, and though it was agony to me, I knew it would be more merciful to shoot her now and not wait until she came after the passengers.

But I couldn't do it.

I glimpsed movement out of the corner of my eye: two farmers were creeping along the aisle. I put a bullet into the floorboards between the first one's legs, sending them darting back toward the group at the rear.

"Next'll be 'bout three feet higher," I said.

The elderly woman came forward, her hands outstretched. "Don't let her hurt us," she said. "Please . . . stop her!"

"That's right!" Marie squawked; in the panic, she had popped most of the buttons from her blouse; her flaccid breasts bulged out from their lace armor, shaking like pudgy, sick animals. "You can't let 'er live!"

The farmers muttered their assent, and shifted toward me.

With their skins all pasty and yellow in the light, their gaping mouths and bugged eyes, they looked to have changed in some putrid fashion. And maybe they had, I thought; maybe there're changes, and then there're changes.

"Stay back," I warned them.

It was just then that the rear door of the car blew open, a cold wind gusting along the aisle, and the refugees came in.

There were three of them, men — or almost-men — wearing crudely sewn skins and furs. For a moment, everything was frozen, the refugees framed by the doorway, by the dark, and the suddenly intensified noise from the rails, and the passengers turned toward them. Apart from the cold, I felt a crawly sensation, a prickling along my spine, and I recalled what Marie had said about feeling the power that enlivened them. One was a hunchback with a heavy-jawed, brutish face; bulging prominences

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My heart was empty of caring, of fear, and the gun leaped easily in my hand.

above the eyes; tufted brows; yellow teeth like an ape's. A second hid behind him. The third was a big man with gray skin and a strangely unfinished face — a gash of a mouth, and black eyes that were almost perfectly round like holes cut in a dirty sheet; his domed skull was bald, ringed with bony knots. I seemed to know something about him — I couldn't define it, but if I'd made a stab at it, I would have done so in terms of strength and intelligence and tenacity.

He said something to me in a language whose words had the sound of a horse munching an apple; I thought it might be a question.

I'm not sure why I didn't obey Cole's advice and shoot straightaway. Maybe I had some hope for the big man; maybe, at the bottom of my soul, I felt he had the right to live, and that I wasn't the one to be his judge and executioner. I began to think that his question had signaled a willingness to negotiate, that he wanted something from us. But I didn't know how to answer him. "Just get on outta here," I said, "and there won't be no trouble."

He spoke again, the same words, but with a touch more intensity; he gave me a searching look — or so I took it. And meeting his eyes, I felt I had made a connection, that what lay behind them was not necessarily alien.

The farmer nearest him made a menacing move, and he held up a hand to still him; he spoke again, again the same words. I cocked my pistol and said forcefully, "Get on out! That's your last warnin'!"

The big man spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness; I swear to God, I believe he smiled, though he might have been trying to frighten me by showing his filed teeth. He spoke to the hunchback, who came toward me in a peculiar crabwise gait. Then three of the farmers charged the big man, and my choices dwindled to one.

My heart was empty of caring, of fear, and the gun leaped easily in my hand. The hunchback went sprawling halfway along the aisle with four bullets in him. I fumbled at my gunbelt, trying to reload, as the big man knocked Marie to the floor, slung a farmer against the wall, and smashed another's face with a fist the size of a cannonball. He bent over Marie, who was groaning and heaving up onto her side. I finished reloading, and fired.

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Three rounds tore gouges in his head, but ricocheted off bone. I fired at his back. The bullet penetrated, but had no effect.

"The throat! Aim for his throat!" somebody yelled as the man turned to me; rills of blood flowed down his face from the head wounds and — as he was grimacing — crimsoned his teeth.

I did as I'd been told, and the man sagged to his knees, clutching his throat; dark blood spewed between his fingers. He tried to speak, his eyes pinning mine, still bright with regard, but he choked on his blood, pitched forward, and lay with one leg spasming. Smoke hung on the air like a misty trail winding through invisible mountains; the rattle of the wheels took on the rhythm of an enormous telegraph. My head ached, and my heart, too. Sick with what I'd done, I cast about for the last man. Marie sat up, staring dazedly at the bodies and the blood rivering the floor; she had a discolored lump coming beneath her eye. The others were huddled in the back. But there was no sign of the third refugee.

Then a man called out, the same voice that had instructed me to aim for the throat. "Don't shoot!" he said. "I won't hurt nobody!"

"Stand up," I said, aiming at the seat from behind which I believed the voice had come, one about three-quarters toward the back of the car.

"I swear I won't hurt nobody. Didn't I help you? Don't that prove I'm on your side?"

The elderly woman, her bonnet speckled with blood, lifted her arm and pointed back of the seat at which I was aiming.

"There he is!" she said, her voice quavering. "There . . . there he is!"

"For Christ's sake!" said the man, his words coming in a torrent. "Don't you understand? I'm on your side. The others . . . they were crazy; this is their home now, this hell. They just wanted to get on board and hurtcha. But me, I'm hardly changed at all. I never wanted to hurtcha; I went along with the others just so I could get onto the train. I was always plannin' to turn on 'em. Please! I just wanna live!"

During his spiel, I had become entranced by the bodies, the smell of gunpowder, the blood, the smoky yellow air. And I was astonished to recall my lack of fear, the ease with which I'd handled the gun, with which I'd killed, all completely out of character. I wondered if I would look into the mirror and see black eyes like Cole's looking back at me, the pupils with the shapes of pentagrams. I wanted to be my old flawed, cowardly self again.

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"Stand up," I told the man. "Keep your hands high, and don't make no funny moves. I won't shoot."

After a second he complied. He was a puny little thing, several inches short of five feet, with a shaggy head of graying black hair, and a pinched face the color of an old pumpkin that had as many wrinkles as an apricot seed. I assumed him to be old, but then I saw that his hands were those of a young man, that his neck wasn't crepey, but firmly fleshed. And I also saw that what I had taken for wrinkles were actually ropy veins darker than the rest of his skin, and that his face was that of someone my own age. What would he do, I wondered, looking like that out in the world.

"Don't trust him," said the farmer, and Marie added, "You can't tell about 'em. Even the innocent-lookin' ones can be dangerous."

I didn't trust him — he had turned on his companions, and, desperate or not, monstrous though they had been, it was nonetheless a betrayal. And besides, I wasn't sure I believed him about the big man wanting to hurt us.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Jesus," he said in a choked voice, "it's been so long since anybody asked me my name. I been livin' with them animals, pretendin' to be one of 'em. . . ." He gathered himself. "Name's Jimmy Crisp. I was a rancher over in Glory till this bastard who stole my land tied me up and put me on a handcar and sent me rollin' into the Patch. It's been six years . . . six goddamn years."

A couple of the farmers urged me to shoot him, and I told them to be quiet. Then Marie's jaw dropped, and she took a backward step, staring at something behind me. The others, too, reacted, and I spun about in time to see something slender leap across the aisle and vanish behind a seat. I blew a hole in the seat, and heard a thin, pining cry, birdlike, yet more piercing than that of any bird I knew. And it was by that cry I realized that I had fired at Tracy; it gave voice to all the pain and frustration I'd sensed in her ever since we had met. I fired a second round at the seat, not wanting to see how she had changed.

The next moment, as the cry sounded once more, drilling through me, somebody grabbed my arm and prevented a third shot, Jimmy Crisp. The passengers were yelling at me to shoot, but Crisp, his horribly wizened face looking up close more than ever like a piece of rotten fruit, said, "She ain't gon' do ya no harm. She changin' into this kinda animal what lives in the

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woods and don't never come 'round people. They peaceful; they just wanna be left alone."

It seemed strange that he would forget his own peril and go to the defense of an animal; I had the idea he was trying to make up for something.

The others kept up their yammering, Marie the loudest of all, urging me to do my duty. My duty! I hadn't asked for the job, and I had nothing but disgust for them. I was about to tell them something along those lines, but Crisp beat me to the punch.

"You stupid bastards! You wanna kill everything you see comin' outta the Patch. Stomp 'em like you would a bug. But know who you killin' for the most part? People who was family to some . . . friends, sisters, cousins. Folks who's foolish like you or sinned against like me. It ain't no life out there, not for a man. But it's a life, all the same — and you got no call to deny it to somethin' ain't tryin' to hurtcha, somethin' that's only got that much life left."

His speech had affected the passengers; but then the thing behind the seat — I couldn't think of it as Tracy — set up a mewling, and they chimed in again with their demands.

Marie came a step toward us. "You don't finish 'er, Cole will." When I made no response, she started down the aisle. "I'm gonna get Cole!"

I trained the gun on her dumpling gut, cocked it. "Hell you are."

In the sickly light, her doughy face with its sour expression and bruised cheekbone resembled something I might have dreamed of after a heavy meal and too much brandy, less human in its revolting stamp than even Crisp's face. She stared at me, her lips pursed, her eyes squinting, and then she began to scream, "Help! He's killin' us! Help us, Cole!"

A scrabbling noise behind me. The animal thing was leaping about, moving with the sinuous speed of a ferret, clawing the windows, apparently terrified by Marie's screams. Through rips in Tracy's dress, I saw that its body was not soft, but all whipcord muscle; the skin had darkened to a midnight blue. The face, too, had darkened, though not as much as the rest; and it had simplified, the features acquiring a cast that was somehow both feline and reptilian, the mouth thinner, wider, and the nose a pair of curved slits. But the eyes, huge and yellow, translucent membranes like lenses of crystal — they carried the sadness I'd heard in that cry. And in the lineaments of the face, minimal though they were, I could still see

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Tracy's troubled beauty. It was awful to detect her essence in that creature. Weakness flooded me; my gun hand trembled. I wanted to work some magic and call her back to the human. Yet, at the same time, I wanted to release her, and I had the thought that this might be the best she could have hoped for: not to have failed with me again, but to have changed utterly, to have gone beyond herself into a world where failure or success would be a simple affair, with simple joys, simple pains, and something wholly of her own making. Maybe I was trying to justify my mistake in having brought her along, but I could not dismiss the idea.

The screams had stopped. Glancing behind me, I found that Marie had fallen into one of the seats, a new lump rising above her left eye; Crisp was standing over her, spewing curses. The farmers were keeping their distance. I swung back to the animal. It turned toward me and let out a feral hiss. I knew that if it couldn't escape soon, it might decide that attacking us was its only hope of survival. And then I would have to kill it.

The train was losing steam, having reached the steepest portion of the grade, and I went to a window, preparing to bust it out with the butt of my pistol, thinking that I could persuade the animal to jump through the hole I made. But as I drew back my arm, the door opened and Cole came in, looking harrowed, his black shirt ripped. He brought his shotgun up to fire at the animal, and I trained my gun on his chest.

"You shoot her, you dead," I said, trying to make my stare into a hard beam he could feel from twenty feet away.

"Don't be crazy, friend. She ain't nothin' to you no more. And 'far as shootin' goes, 'pears we got us a Mexican standoff."

"All I care about's I got you. So if you ready to die. . . ."

"Oh, I'm ready! I been ready for years. How 'bout you?"

I noticed the muscles in his neck and shoulders were tightening; he was preparing to make a move. I had the idea that I could smell ozone in the air, in the bad yellow light . . . or maybe it was the coppery scent of blood drying on the floor.

"Put the gun down," I said. "Put it down right now."

"Listen, son!" he said, his tone even and easy. "I'm givin' you a chance 'cause you done me a service. Ain't nothin' left of your woman. And all you doin' is makin' things worse for everybody . . . her included."

Cole was blind — I understood that now. He had been too long on the job; he was operating upon judgments made years before, and was in-

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capable of weighing the case before him. In the seams and wrinkles of his worn face was written a language of stubborn and unyielding principle. He had, as he himself had said, seen too much to want to see more, and so he had stopped seeing anything that demanded new judgments. But my vision was clear, my focus sharp. I could see those eerie pupils contracting, their shapes changing like the spots on a magical deck of cards, going hearts to spades, to a shape more ominous than the previous one, and I knew that he was going to take me out, that he figured it was his only chance.

"Oh shit!" I said. "Refugees!"

His head jerked to the side, and I dropped my aim a hair and fired. The bullet caught his hip and threw him back against the wall; the shotgun discharged into the ceiling, and the animal thing bolted for the door, flowed through it, and was gone. I ran after it and stood between the cars. As I've said, the train was barely moving, and so I had a good long view of what I'd learned to love too late running away from me.

The land sloped sharply from the tracks, a decline of hummocky moonlit snow giving out into evergreen forest halfway down, and beyond lay a plain that stretched to the horizon. Such a place, that plain, as you might envision after chewing some of those cactus buds that Indians sell in the Mexican markets. Darkly irridescent points of land hooking out into water that had the dull gleam of tarnished silver, a great river of it feeding through a country of virgin timber and solitary habitations, nodes of fiery color lodged in the vast gloomy sweep of the heart of the Patch. Fountains of light spraying up from nowhere and vanishing. Wild stars and pale enormities of cloud, a sky of such complex immensity that it seemed an entity unto itself, the embodiment of a profound emotion. Areas of shadow where witchy glows flickered. Islands of phosphorescence effloresced and faded in the farthest reaches like universes being born; shadows with no source passed across the surface of the water; lightnings touched the earth and spread glittering tides across it. It was lovely and evil, foul and serene, intimate and deadly. There was no end to its mysterious detail, its potential for change. And running across the snow toward all that majestic confusion and silent tumult was Tracy. . . . I had come to accept it as being her, because I had given up on her, let her go, and also because I understood that the Patch wasn't the hell I had imagined, that while it might be inimical and repulsive to me, for others

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more alive than I, it was the only home possible, and held out an opportunity for rewards that my world couldn't offer. Good and evil were more sharply defined there, and there was a grandeur in the freedom and wildness of the place, in the endless reach of the solitudes, in the feeling that whatever fate was yours, it was worked out from your deeds, and not a weakness bred into you and enforced by lies. I'd felt something of that freedom and wildness in the gray-skinned man I had killed, though at the time I wouldn't have been able to put it into words. For certain I had known that he needed something more than our lives, something he hadn't been able to communicate and had not trusted me to understand. And in truth I could not have understood — but now, seeing more clearly than I ever had, I believed we might have made a compact, established a bond that would have prevented the deaths. And what about Crisp and the refugees who wandered back to the world? Half-changed men unsuited for life in either place, incompatible with any of the worlds. That, I knew, was the case. Crisp had hinted at that in his defense of Tracy, and he must have felt it in his bones. I was probably like that, I thought. Born too much for one place, too little for the other. Wrong by an inch for happiness. Or not happiness — I didn't believe in that any longer. For strength, for constancy.

As I contemplated all this, I watched that lean figure growing smaller and smaller, darkening against the snow. Sort of like watching a hole being burned in white paper by a match held behind it, except in reverse, the hole dwindling and finally closing. It wasn't until after she had disappeared into the shadows of the trees that I felt her loss, and it was not the tearing pain I might have expected. What I felt was softer than that, expressed more precisely by the Mex word for pain, *dolor*, which implies a drooping head, a sweet fall of darkness over the heart, a luminous ache that can light the gloom it creates. I understood from this that I'd lost Tracy long ago, and that only this minute had I begun to miss her.

At last, shivering from the cold, I went back inside. My bullet had ripped a furrow in Cole's hip, yet had done no serious damage. The elderly lady had bandaged him, and he was sitting on the floor; his color was a bit off, but otherwise he appeared sound. He had a quart of Emerson's bourbon in hand. He glanced up at me and shook his head ruefully.

"You a pure damn fool," he said without malice, mildly, just making an observation. "But you got stones; I give you that."

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I flopped down next to him. "You were wrong to wanna shoot her . . . dead wrong. You shoulda seen that."

He was not, I realized, interested in the subject. "I should lock you 'way," he said. "Maybe that'd smarten you up."

"I'll testify against him," said Marie. "You can count on that, Cole."

She was back in her seat. They were all sitting — the farmers, the elderly lady — all in the same attitudes that they'd exhibited at the beginning of the trip. Nothing might have happened. Only Crisp, who was rocking back and forth in his seat, his grotesque face buried in his hands, showed any sign of having gone through a bad time. He was talking to himself — agitated words that I couldn't make out; from time to time, he stomped his foot and slammed a fist into his thigh, as if punishing himself. I didn't have either the energy or the right pitch to console him.

"You don't bring the charges," Marie said to Cole, primping herself in a hand mirror, dabbing powder onto her bruises, "then I will. I ain't 'bout to have my person assaulted way it's been on this trip."

"Just be quiet, Marie," Cole said wearily; he shifted and winced.

"Sorry 'bout that." I nodded at his hip.

He made an amused noise. "I've had worse. It'll mend."

"I'm amazed," I told him. "If I'd known people took gettin' shot as good as you, I'd have shot a lot more people in my time."

He grunted with amusement. "That's how it goes. Sometimes you bite the tiger; sometimes the tiger bites you."

"Well, there's that," I said.

Marie stared at us, dumbfounded. "You ain't gon' just forget it, are ya, Cole? He's committed a blood crime!"

"I'll study on it," said Cole. "But tell ya the truth, puttin' this boy away ain't gon' cure nothin'. And I was thinkin' I could use him on the line."

"I don't think I'm up to it," I said. "Anyway, that's *your* bad fortune, not mine."

He gave me an appraising look. "Maybe you right. Now I consider it, you probably won't be so lucky with the changes, you come back to the Patch."

We had reached the top of the grade and started down, picking up speed with every second. I gazed out the window at the sweep of the plain, the shining waters and dark curves of land; it seemed to me that the whole expanse formed a single fabulous image, like a character in some ancient

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script or a symbol on a treasure map. And there must be treasure out there, I thought. There must be a million sights worth seeing, a million times worth having. I imagined Tracy somewhere in it, asleep in its shadows, her old life receded to a dream.

"I can't believe this!" said Marie. "He puts a bullet into you, and you sayin' you'd offer him a job?"

Cole winked at me. "You can pick your nose, Marie . . . not your friends."

"The man almost got us killed! I ain't gon' stand by and see him get off scot-free!"

With an inarticulate yell, Crisp sprang to his feet; he turned this way and that, as if unsure of whom he wanted to address. "There's this place in the Patch," he said, emoting like a preacher, "this one place so bad can't nothin' but the worst of 'em stand it, the ones who's monsters, who sleep on raw meat and shit their babies. It makes Hell look like Sunday school. Fire don't warm you there; it just cast shadows and hurts your eyes. The snow's white insects; the rain's transparent razors." He scurried up behind Marie, whipped a hunting knife out from his sleeve, and put the edge to her throat. "And I'm takin' you there, pig. I'm takin' you right there, 'cause that's where you fuckin' belong." He hauled her to her feet and stared wild-eyed at me. "Don't you try and stop me! I'll bleed 'er here and now!"

I regarded him wearily. Much as I would have loved to see Marie dragged out into the Patch, oddly enough, it wasn't in me to let Crisp do it.

"Sit down," I told him. "You ain't doin' no good by this."

Marie's eyes rolled down, trying to see the knife.

I came to my feet, and Crisp nicked her; she squeaked and went stiff.

"Get back!" he warned me.

"I ain't gonna interfere, man," I said. "I just want to ask you a coupla questions . . . all right?"

That unnerved him, but he said, "Yeah, sure."

"The men you come aboard with wanted to hurt us. But that big fella, he was askin' me somethin'. I mean, he didn't just come through the door and start breakin' bones. What was he askin'?"

"I don't know."

"Thought you said you was pretendin' to be one of 'em. You must know the language he was talkin' in."

He opened his mouth, closed it, obviously flustered.

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"Then I was thinkin' 'bout this woman you got there," I said. "'Bout why she's so mean. Way I figger, she's just scared of who she is, hatin' herself 'cause she's fat and useless and don't belong nowhere. All she got to do is to ride back and forth on this damn train. She can't hate herself enough to satisfy, so she takes it out on other people. She don't really want to hurt us. She just ain't got the guts to hurt herself. See what I'm saying?"

"You talkin' crazy." Crisp looked to the others as if for confirmation. "What you tryin' to do?"

"Now you come on board with these other two, and you turn on 'em. You tell us you was always plannin' to turn on 'em, that you was just playin' along with 'em. They was gonna hurt us, you say. But be that as it may, you weren't square with 'em . . . . 'cause you was afraid."

"What'd you want me to do? Let 'em kill you?"

"You would have done anything to get outta the Patch. You weren't like them others. Don't matter what they were; you just weren't one of 'em. You didn't think you belonged with 'em. You were too scared to think about anything 'cept that. But once you was shut of 'em, alone with us, it was the same exact situation. You were scared of us; you felt you didn't belong. You could feel that this wasn't your answer, either, that you was as wrong here as you was in the Patch. But still, you had to make us believe you were one of us, so you went on 'bout how you'd helped us, how you'd betrayed the ones you boarded with to save our lives. Like you said . . . just playin' along."

"No," said Crisp, "no, that ain't it."

"'Course, then you started hatin' yourself 'cause you betrayed 'em, and 'cause you couldn't hate yourself enough to satisfy, you picked out Marie here to hate. Now, I admit she's easy to hate. But when you get right down to it, what she been doin' ain't no different than what you doin' now . . . is it?"

The tension was draining from Crisp; he looked hopeless, beaten.

"Don't you see?" I asked him. "Ain't nowhere in this world you gon' feel at home. And stickin' some pathetic woman what's the same as you just gon' make things worse."

"Leave me be!"

"What was the big man askin'?"

"Nothin'. . . . I don't know."

"What was he askin'?"

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Crisp shouted, "I don't know!"

"What'd he want? Food — is that it? Medicine? Fuel?"

He gave his head a violent shake as if trying to dislodge something inside it; it appeared that he couldn't decide whether to smile at me or snarl. That rotted jack-o'-lantern head wobbled like it was about to fall off his neck.

"You don't have to tell me," I said. "I don't know what he wanted, but I do know it wasn't blood."

Crisp let out a moan, a terrible sound full of loathing and pain.

"Our help's what he wanted," I said. "He wasn't hopin' too much, but he was willin' to chance askin' me a question just in case I'd be smart enough to understand it."

The little man shoved Marie down and faced me with the knife, swaying with the erratic motion of the train, his face working. I said calmly, carefully, "That ain't gon' do it for ya, either."

He jabbed at me with the knife, a warning, but in his face was the rumpled, unsteady look of death. As I'd been earlier, he was past caring.

"Whatever you done," I said, "ain't no worse'n things we everyone of us done. We all a patchwork of good and bad. You maybe did wrong with your companions, but you saved a life once you got on board. Nobody here's gonna fault you. But you can't go 'round hurtin' people to make yourself feel better. You think about that a minute."

He seemed to be obeying my instruction, thinking things over, but I guess there was just too much wrongness in his head, too much trouble in his past, for thought to make much sense. I had relaxed a bit, expecting him to see reason, and when he came at me, quicker than I would have believed possible, I wasn't ready, and took a slice on my forearm. I gritted my teeth against the pain and tried to grab him, but he ducked and darted past me out the door. He stood between the cars, a shadowy figure hanging onto the safety rail. The train was rocketing along now, and I understood what he intended and that he had no chance. But he was no longer my responsibility, and so I only watched and waited. He hesitated, glanced back into the car, and I could feel his yearning, the weight of his anguish, all the shattering displacement of what he'd hoped being flooded by what he knew. Then he swung out over the rail and vanished into the black rush of the night. If he cried out, it was lost in the thunder of our passage.

Dispirited, I sat back down beside Cole, ignoring the gabble from the

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rear of the car, Marie sobbing, the farmers all talking at once.

"You didn't handle that 'un too good." Cole passed me the bourbon.

I had a slug and began wrapping my arm with a bandanna. "'Bout as good as you handled me," I told him.

We were moving down into the deep forest, and all I could make out of the great plain through the ragged silhouettes of the evergreens were intermittent glints of silvery water and unearthly fire. I finished wrapping my arm, had some more bourbon, and leaned back.

"Are we all right, now?" I asked. "Are we past havin' more trouble?"

Cole said, "Most likely," and reclaimed his bourbon. After a while he asked what I planned to do now that everything had changed for me.

"I laughed. "I'm still bound for Glory."

He made a noncommittal noise and drank.

"That's one hell of a ride," I said. "Hell of a ride!"

I gazed off along the car, at the dried blood and the farmers, at Marie, huge and depressed, muffled in her coat. Despite everything, I couldn't work up hate for her. All my emotions had been fired, leaving me with a cylinder full of empty chambers. A shudder went through me, not of cold, but some last residue voiding itself, a dry heave of the spirit.

Tracy, I thought, and then even that was gone.

"What's there to do after this?" I asked. "What's left?"

"Turn around and go back the other way was all I could ever figger," Cole said.

I TOOK A room in Glory. It was a tiny, crooked room with a slanted ceiling and leaning walls, cold as a penny. From the window I could see ramshackle buildings and rutted dirt streets marbled with crusts of snow. By day, buckboards slotted along the ruts; women in wool shawls and long skirts hustled past; men loaded and unloaded kegs of nails and bales of straw and grain sacks, and stopped into the saloons for a drink; kids chased each other, ducking under horses and wagons and pelting each other with snowballs. Nights, there was some wildness — tinny piano music, gunshots, female shrieks — but not so much as there had been in White Eagle. As far as I could tell from being there a few days, every town I'd ever known ought to have been named Glory, because they were all of them the same.

There were refugees, of course. They slept in alleys and doorways,

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wherever it was dark and there was a chance of making it through the night without being beaten. None of the citizens wanted them around, what with their peculiar habits and deformities, but they were tolerated due to some sort of Christian twitch. I would sit by my window and watch them slink about, and wonder if I wasn't one myself. I hadn't bothered looking up my friends to borrow money. That was a plan I'd made with Tracy, and even if she had been there, I doubt I could have stuck to it. I had changed, and few of my old possessions had any meaning. Instead, I got a job swamping out a saloon, which paid enough for food and shelter, and occasionally to bring a woman up to my crooked room. The women made me happy, but not for long. Once they were gone, I would go stand in the dark and spy on life. I saw a thousand things I wanted, yet nothing I wanted enough to seize, to just grab and have a bite and laugh with the joy of fulfilled desire. I was as empty as I'd been at the beginning of the ride from White Eagle, and at its end. And when I looked into mirrors, I saw a man on the run from himself, growing sick and weak again.

Spring faded; summer died; fall ebbed. I won a horse in a poker game, a shit-brown, sore-kneed, mean-tempered animal that I kept only because I was in no position to throw anything away. I hated that horse, and I would have just as soon gotten cozy with a skunk than put a saddle on him. But one morning I realized I had grown so sick of myself that I couldn't stand my room any longer. It reeked of my hangovers, my sodden incapacity. I packed a bedroll, mounted up, and headed east for Steadley, again thinking what I needed was a new place, a new start. But the ride came to be its own thing. The air so crisp it flowed into my lungs like cool fire, the sky that potent blue you find only on the backside of creation, with snow peaks ahead and to the north. I'd intended to do some soul-searching, to try and gain perspective. But it appeared that by simply leaving Glory, I had gained sufficient perspective, and I experienced sweeps of emotion that in their purity seemed to embody the perfection of the sky, the shining mountains, and the momentum of the land, the great flow of it eastward, rising and declining with the smoothness of deep ocean swells. My body felt clean, my head empty of worries. Even the horse's temper had improved.

A day and a half later, when Steadley heaved into view, a gaggle of weathered frame buildings that differed from Glory only by its greater size and the profusion of its squalor, I was not yet ready to end my ride, and I figured I would keep going awhile and pitch camp in the hills east of town.

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Weather closed in, the sky grayed, and fat white flakes started to fall. But when I reached the hills, I was still eager to continue, and as the light faded toward dusk, I told myself I'd ride a few miles more, close — yet not too close — to the edge of the Patch. I moved into evergreen forest, following the railroad tracks, which were banked high with snow that had fallen the previous week, finding peace among the dark trees. Tiny birds with white bellies and black caps were hopping thick as fleas beneath them; in their nervous agitation, they reminded me of how my thoughts had been working recently. Wind whirled up fresh powder from the snow crust, stretched it out into veils that went flowing across the banks and glittered for a moment before dissipating; the heavy, snow-laden boughs of the firs barely trembled.

I was preparing to scout about for a campsite, when I heard the train from Steadley coming, and spotted its smoke unwinding above the treetops; a minute later I saw the locomotive round a bend, sparks fluming from its smokestack, a gigantic black beast out of Hell, its brass-trimmed cowcatcher looking like golden teeth in the decaying light. It was on an upgrade, moving at a relatively slow pace, and I urged the horse into a trot alongside, looking in the windows, studying the frightened faces of the passengers. As the end of a car passed, a man with a shotgun leaned out between cars and shouted for me to keep away. Cole. Even at that distance, I had a clear impression of his eyes, a sense of their bizarre black configurations.

"Hey, Cole!" I called out. "Don't you recognize me?"

He peered at me, leaning farther out, hanging onto the safety rail. "Ain't you the boy put a hole in my hip?"

I waved. "How you been?"

"Tolerable . . . and you?"

"Shit, I'm doin' fine as a man can do!" And oddly enough, I believed it.

"Where the hell you think you goin'?" Cole shouted as the train began to pick up speed. "We 'bout into the Patch!"

"Well, that's where I'm goin'!" His warning didn't affect me . . . or not the way I would have expected, anyway. I felt challenged, excited, alive. I urged the horse into a gallop, plunging through the snow, and was astounded by the ease with which he responded.

"You crazy! Don't you remember what I said? The changes gon' be different for ya this time!"

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I laughed. "Don't tell me you ain't never wanted to go out into it, to find what's there. You can't see it without feelin' that way?"

He nodded. "Oh yeah! I've had that feelin' a time or two."

"Then c'mon with me!" I spurred the horse faster. "We'd make a pair, the two of us! We could scare monsters into hidin' and steal the princess from the tower, we could!"

He just looked at me and grinned.

"C'mon!" I yelled. "What you got to lose? We'll crown ourselves kings of the goddamn place! C'mon with me!"

And I believed that, too — that we could see all of the wonders and intricacies of the Patch, its violent lights and darks, and come through victorious. I was heady with that knowledge.

A plume of smoke from the engine swirled between us, and after it had passed, he called, "Naw, that's *your* bad fortune, not mine!"

The train was pulling away from me, heading for another curve, and as the train began to angle around it, Cole yelled, "Luck to you!"

"Shit, I don't need luck!" I told him. "I got a special moon watches over me; I'm part of an infinite design. I got more fire in me than that ol' engine of yours. What do I need with luck?"

"Take it anyway!" he cried, waving with his shotgun, and then the car jolted around the bend, and I saw him no more.

I had thought all my brave words were bluster, that once he had gone out of sight, I would rein in the horse and find myself a campsite, but I kept urging the horse to run faster. And it was not just my urging that commanded us, because I noticed then that the horse had changed, become a force of its own, a great dark engine with a steaming heart that pulled me along and helped me abide by a decision that I realized I had already made, that I'd made long before I left Glory. I recalled watching Tracy run for the cover of the woods, how I'd thought of her as running away from danger; but seeing her in my mind's eye, I understood that she had been running for joy, for life, fueled by all the brilliant thoughtfulness that was empowering me now. That was it, you see. There was no logic to my act, no sense, no plan, no self-manipulation. I was free of all that, free of fetters I'd never known existed, of impediments so subtle in their hold that I couldn't even name them; and I was running as I had not since I had been a boy, for the pure muscular exhilaration, knowing nothing but an intoxicating sense of freedom, the wind a fire at my back, and the snow

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blowing up into phantoms, and the dark trees like fortress towers, and the world a richness of absolutes. It might be I was running toward death, but that prospect held no terror for me. I had come from a death far worse than any toward which I might be going, a palsy of trepidation and perverted dreams that had been snuffing out my soul, and even if I were to die that minute, I would be better off for having taken this chance. Death was waiting somewhere, no doubt about it, but I was finished with sniffling and whining, trying to beat it by dodges and deceits, trying to work angles and cover all my bets, softening the blows of life by burrowing beneath the skirts of an unhappy woman.

To my amazement, we had begun to catch up with the train. That horse of mine was a marvel, each stride carrying us an improbable distance. I could not see its face, but I knew the measure of its change, its eyes aglow like miner's lanterns, its teeth sharp and capable of tearing, its hooves driving sparks from the stones. And I felt as well the measure of my own change. It wasn't what I might have picked had I had a choice, but it was true to myself in a way to which I'd never admitted. My heart was a furious cell, my mind thick with outlaw desires, my hands fit for loving and killing and little in between. I spurred the horse, and we went coursing past the last car. I matched the train's pace and gazed through the window at a pretty woman in a dark blue dress. I stared at her breasts, my mouth watering, and wanted her with a sudden blaze of passion that came near to unseating me. She drew back, pale and frightened, a hand to her mouth — god knows what face I now presented to the world. I laughed, a howl that made a chord with the howling wind. There was an evil joy in the laugh that — had I heard it at any other time — would have made my spit dry and my balls shrivel up into seeds; now I loved to hear it, knowing it for the signal music of my new life. I considered swinging onto the car and taking the woman, but she offered nothing I could not find in more satisfying form upon the vast and glowing plain that lay to the north. And so I reined the horse in that direction, swerving down through the evergreens, smashing aside the boughs with my strong right hand and sending up a cloud of snow behind, bound at last for glory, the only kind accessible to those who have failed at ordinary grace, bound for the end of limits and the final places of love and power, and all the blooded dreams and mysteries beyond.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE NEAREST STAR

YOU WOULD think that a person like myself is immune to frustration where the writing of books is concerned. The total number of my published books stands, at the moment, at 425. Therefore, it might seem that there isn't a book that I would like to write that I haven't written.

Yet it's not so.

In the 1970's, I wrote a series of astronomy books for the general public, each of them being full of tables and figures. The titles of four of them were: 1) "Jupiter, the Largest Planet" 3) "Mars, the Red Planet" 4) "Saturn and Beyond" and 5) "Venus: Near Neighbor of the Sun." In these four, I managed to cover every planet in the solar system and to say a few words about their satellites, the asteroids, and the comets.

The second book in the series was "Alpha Centauri: the Nearest Star."

Well, Alpha Centauri is *not* the nearest star. Our Sun is. So I was planning to write a sixth book in the series that would deal with the Sun, both to round out my description of the Solar system and to correct the mistitling of my book on Alpha Centauri. I even have a contract somewhere for that book.

But it never got written. Other books intervened. They still intervene.

The next best thing, then, is to write essays on the Sun for this series, and that I now plan to do. Naturally, if this were a book I would start with the apparent motion of the Sun in the heavens and talk about how this affects day and night, and the seasons, and the calendar, and astrology, and so on. However, I have written essays earlier in this series on all these subjects.

What I want to do now, then, is to write about the nature and the properties of the Sun, and I'll begin by asking, "How near is the nearest

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star?" Are you all ready? Good, let's go.

To all appearances, the Sun is simply a circle of light that moves across the sky in the course of the day. If anyone were to guess, purely from appearances, how large it was, the most popular guess would probably be, "Oh, about a foot across."

That can't be so, however. In order for an object a foot across to look the size of the Sun in our sky, it has to be only 114 feet away, and you know the Sun has to be farther away than *that*. So how far is it, and how big is it?

The first person we know of by name who tried to answer the question was a Greek astronomer, Aristarchus of Samos (310-230 B.C.).

Aristarchus knew that the Moon shone by the reflected light of the Sun and that at the moment when the Moon was exactly half-illuminated, the Earth, the Moon and the Sun should be at the apices of a right triangle. If he could calculate the size of even one of the acute angles of the triangle, he could, by trigonometry, work out the relative lengths of the sides of the triangle.

His mathematics was completely correct, but he had no instrument with which to measure the angle precisely. His estimate was rather far off, and he calculated that the Sun was about 20 times as far from the Earth as the Moon was. This was a radical underestimate, but given the circumstances, it was a remarkable achievement, so hats off to Aristarchus.

He went further. He studied eclipses of the Moon and realized that the curve of the darkness that invaded the Moon at this time was the shadow of the curve of the spherical Earth. By comparing the curve of the Earth's shadow with the curve of the Moon's edge, he estimated that the Moon must be about 1/3 the diameter of the Earth. Not bad!

And now he went still farther. Since the Moon and the Sun are the same apparent size, the real size must be proportional to the distance from Earth. If the Sun is 20 times as far as the Moon is, it must be 20 times as large as the Moon is. If the Moon is 1/3 the diameter of the Earth, then the Sun must be about 7 times the diameter of the Earth.

But that raises an interesting question. Why should a huge, bloated body like the Sun revolve about the midget Earth? Indeed, Aristarchus answered that question by suggesting that the Earth and the other planets moved about the Sun.

It was really a remarkable bit of ratiocination that had only the tiny flaw of being eighteen centuries ahead of its time — because everyone laughed at him. Aristarchus'

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writings didn't survive, and we only know of his suggestions because Archimedes (287-212 B.C.) the greatest of all the ancient mathematicians and scientists, mentioned them — and laughed.

The reason that Aristarchus couldn't put across his notions was two-fold. First, it stood to reason that the Earth was *not* moving because any idiot could plainly see that it wasn't. If you're on a horse, you can tell if it's standing still or if it is moving, even with your eyes closed, and shouldn't that be true if you're on Earth?

Besides, as Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) had earlier pointed out, if the Earth moved about the Sun, the motion ought to be reflected in a corresponding motion of the stars in reverse. (He was absolutely correct in this, but it didn't occur to him that the stars might be so far off that the stellar motion would be too small to measure.) Since the stars were clearly seen to be motionless, the Earth was motionless as well.

Suppose we forget about the motion of the Earth, however. Aristarchus merely took that as an inference from his work on the relative sizes of the Earth, Moon and Sun. Even if the Earth is standing still, his calculations remain supported by impeccable mathematics (if highly peccable measurements). Why couldn't that be accepted?

Well, two centuries before, the philosopher Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (500-428 B.C.), while living in Athens, had suggested that the Sun was a blazing rock about a hundred miles across, and for this piece of blasphemy, among others, he was tried for impiety and atheism, and he thought it wise to leave Athens.

Of course, Anaxagoras was simply making an assertion, whereas Aristarchus had worked it out mathematically and come out with a size far huger than the earlier one. However, Cleanthes of Assos, a Stoic philosopher who lived in Aristarchus' times (and who may have reached the age of 100 before he died) was fiercely offended and suggested that Aristarchus be tried for impiety, too. (As far as we know, though, he wasn't.)

Still, you can see that talk concerning the Sun's size and the Earth's motion wasn't encouraged even in the days when Greeks believed in free speech (more or less). It certainly wasn't encouraged when such freedoms disappeared in post-Greek times.

However, let's continue. About 240 B.C., the Greek philosopher Eratosthenes of Cyrene (176-196 B.C.) noticed the difference in the comparative lengths of shadows at dif-

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ferent spots on the Earth. He attributed this, correctly, to the fact that Earth's surface was curved, and he worked out a correct trigonometric method for calculating from that the size of the Earth. Since his measurements were good, he got an approximately correct answer. Rather than try to work out the figures Eratosthenes got, I will give you the current figures. The Earth has a diameter of 12, 756 kilometers (7,926 miles) and a circumference of 40,075 kilometers (24,900 miles).

Furthermore, about 150 B.C., the greatest of all the Greek astronomers, Hipparchus of Nicaea (190-120 B.C.) attempted to measure the distance of the Moon and decided that its distance was equal to 60 times the radius of the Earth, or 30 times its diameter. This is just about correct, and the current value of the average distance of the Moon is 384,401 kilometers (238,861 miles) or 30.13 times the diameter of the Earth.

If we stick to Aristarchus's suggestion that the Sun is 20 times as far from us as the Moon is, then the figures given us by Eratosthenes and Hipparchus tell us that the Sun is about 7,688,000 kilometers (4,777,000 miles) from us.

From the Moon's *apparent* size and its known distance, we can calculate that its absolute diameter must be 3,476 kilometers (2,160 miles). If Sun has a diameter twenty times as large it is 69,500 kilometers across (43,200 miles).

In other words, Greek astronomy ends by giving us a picture of a Sun at least 70,000 kilometers across, but for some 1700 years people managed to ignore that. It was too unsettling.

Of course, one might argue that even if the Sun were that huge, it was still merely an insubstantial sphere of light, and it was the Earth that, alone of all the objects in the Universe, was solid and heavy, so that it was the natural candidate for being at the center.

That brings us to the Polish astronomer Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543), who returned to Aristarchus's idea of the Earth going around the Sun. He didn't come to that as a result of thinking about the huge size of the Sun, but only because it seemed to him that the mathematics of predicting planetary motions across the sky would be simplified if it were assumed that it was the Earth and the other planets moving about the Sun, rather than the Sun and the other planets moving about the Earth.

For years, Copernicus refrained from actually publishing his work lest he, like Anaxagoras and Aristarchus, get in trouble with the authorities. He finally did have it

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printed in 1543, but only when he was safely on his deathbed.

And at that, the publisher (who didn't want to get into trouble either) put in a preface stating that the Copernican theory was not intended to indicate that the Earth *really* moved about the Sun, but that it was only a mathematical device for calculating planetary motions.

It took an entire century for even the scientific and scholarly world to accept Copernicus. Only a few hundred copies of the first edition were printed. A second edition didn't appear till 1566 in Basel, and a third not till 1617 in Amsterdam. (In the original manuscript by the way, Copernicus mentioned Aristarchus, then crossed it out. Either he didn't want to get into further trouble by reminding the world of that infamous crackpot, or he didn't want to share the credit, probably the former in my view.)

The English philosopher Francis Bacon (1561-1626), an early and strong advocate of experimental science, would not accept Copernicus because Bacon couldn't make himself believe that the huge, massive Earth was flying through space. Harvard University, which was founded in 1636, taught for years that the Sun went about the Earth.

In 1807, when Napoleon's conquering career brought him to Poland, he visited the house where Copernicus was born and expressed his surprise that no statue had been raised in his honor. But it wasn't till 1835 that Copernicus's book was taken off the Index, which listed those books banned by the Roman Catholic Church. And, in 1839, when a statue of Copernicus was *finally* unveiled in Warsaw, no Catholic priest would officiate at the ceremonies.

And even *today*, when a poll was taken of American *adults* as to the astronomical facts of life, 21 percent gave it as their opinion that the Sun went around the Earth. Another 7 percent didn't know, or possibly didn't care.

How can we account for all the trouble Copernicus feared, for the length of time it took to accept him, and for the refusal of one-quarter of American adults to accept him *today*?

My own feeling is that it all comes down to two verses in the Bible. Joshua was fighting the battle of Gebeon, and it looked as though the enemy might escape under cover of night. Joshua 10:12-13 tells the story:

"Then spake Joshua to the Lord in the day when the Lord delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon. . . And the sun stood

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still . . . until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies . . . the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day."

Now how could Joshua (and God) possibly have ordered the Sun to stand still, unless it were ordinarily moving?

To those Fundamentalists of all periods who considered the Bible to be inspired by God with every word divinely true, it would seem on the basis of these verses (very famous ones) that the Bible says the Sun is moving, and therefore going around the Earth; and that, frankly, I think explains everything.

You might argue, of course, that Copernicus's heliocentric theory is "just a theory," just a mathematical device.

But then came the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) and his telescope. In January of 1610, Galileo spotted four small objects (we call them satellites now) that move around Jupiter exactly as Copernicus said that planets, including the Earth, moved about the Sun. For one thing, that showed that not *all* bodies move about the Earth. For another, it showed four small bodies moving about a much larger body. If the Sun were really much larger than Earth, as Aristarchus had shown, then it made sense for the Earth to move around the Sun.

However, there were arguments against Galileo's discovery. One scholar pointed out that since Aristotle hadn't mentioned these satellites anywhere in his writings, they didn't exist. Another pointed out that since they could only be seen through a telescope, they were the creation of the telescope, and didn't really exist. Others simply refused to look and therefore didn't see them, which showed they didn't exist.

But suppose the satellites did exist. If Jupiter moved around the Earth, then it carried the satellites with it, and the satellites also went around the Earth. Then, too, since Jupiter and the satellites (and the Sun) were all made of immaterial heaven stuff, and only Earth was solid and heavy, it didn't matter how the heavenly bodies went around each other; they all, in the end, went around the Earth.

But then came the matter of Venus. It reflected the light from the Sun, and if the notion of Venus and the Sun both going around the Earth was correct, Venus should always display a crescent. If, on the other hand, Venus and the Earth were both going around the Sun, Venus should show a full complement of phases, exactly as the Moon does.

Galileo studied Venus through his telescope and, by December 11,

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1610, was satisfied that the phases were a full complement, like the Moon. That put him into a quandary. Did he announce that the phases of Venus showed that the Earth moved around the Sun, and not vice versa, and get himself into deep trouble? Or did he keep quiet and risk losing credit for the discovery? (Other people were by now using telescopes, too.)

What Galileo did was to publish a Latin phrase, therefore, that went: "Haec immatura a me iam frustra legunter o.y." This means "These unripe things are read by me." The "o.y." was only added to make it come out right. Then, if anyone tried to claim later credit for the discovery, Galileo needed only to rearrange the letter anagram-wise, and get "Cynthiae figuras aemulatur Mater Amorum." This is Latin for "The Mother of Love imitates Cynthia's shape," where the Mother of Love is clearly Venus and Cynthia is one of the poetic names for the Moon.

But how could one defeat the argument that heavenly bodies are so different from Earth, you can't reason from one to the other. The first thing that Galileo had looked at with his telescope, in 1609, was the Moon; and he had made out mountains and craters and seas on its surface. The Moon might be a heavenly body, but it was clearly an Earth-like world.

What about the fact that heavenly bodies glow with light and the Earth is dark? Well, the planets *don't* glow with light. The fact that the Moon and Venus show phases demonstrated that they are dark bodies shining by the reflected light of the Sun. What's more, Galileo argued, the dark part of the Moon, when only a crescent is shining, can be made out by a very soft light, and that must be the result of Earth shining by reflected Sunlight in the Moon's sky, as the Moon shines in ours. We are seeing "Earthshine" on the Moon, so that Earth too glows with light as the Moon and Venus do.

Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) had noted Earthshine and interpreted it correctly over a century before, but he had saved himself a lot of trouble by not publishing. Galileo was less cautious. In 1632, he published all his reasoning in "Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems" and did it in Italian, so that all his countrymen could read it and not just a bunch of effete scholars who understood Latin.

You all know what happened. In 1633, Galileo was called before the Inquisition, threatened with torture, and forced to state that the Earth did not move, and to promise nevermore to say that it did.

There is a legend that as Galileo

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left the court, he muttered under his breath, "Eppur si muove!" ("But it moves just the same!") referring to the Earth. He may not have. He was nearly seventy years old, and playing the wise guy with the Inquisition, which was notorious for its lack of a sense of humor, would have been incredibly foolish.

But, as a matter of fact, the Earth *did* move anyway.

This is not to say that Copernicus was completely right. The heliocentric theory is *not* "just a theory." It has innumerable observations and extraordinarily close reasoning to back it up, as all good theories must have. But that doesn't mean that Copernicus had it right in every detail. It could be improved. (Scientific theories can always be improved and *are* improved. That is one of the glories of science. It is the authoritarian view of the Universe that is frozen in stone and cannot be changed, so that once it is wrong, it is wrong forever.)

Thus, Copernicus, in switching from an Earth-centered planetary system to a Sun-centered one, kept the old Greek idea that the bodies moved about the center in perfect circles or combinations of circles.

The German astronomer Johann Kepler (1571-1630), studying the best observations of Mars's position ever taken, up to that time — by the Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) — realized that a circle wouldn't do. Mars and presumably all the planets moved in elliptical orbits about the Sun, with the Sun not at the center of the ellipse, but at a focus a little to one side of the center. He also worked out the changing speeds at which planets had to move in such orbits, and how those speeds changed with distance from the Sun.

It all boiled down to "Kepler's three laws of planetary motion," published in 1609 and 1619. They have not had to be measurably modified in all the nearly four centuries since, so Kepler finally got the Solar system right.

It was possible now to make a model of the Solar system with the Sun in the center and with all the planetary orbits about it to exact scale. (At least one can do it mathematically, and even take into account how each planet moves in its orbit, and, therefore, where at any given moment, all the planets would be relative to each other and to the Sun.

The Moon is not part of this model because it goes around the Earth and not around the Sun, so that it doesn't fit into Kepler's laws the same way. That goes for Jupiter's satellites, too.

Therefore, if the distance of any planet from the Earth is determined,

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then the distance of all the other planets *and the Sun* can be easily calculated from the Keplerian model.

This offers two advantages. At least three of the planets; Mars, Venus and Mercury; are closer to the Earth than the Sun is, at least some of the time, and their distance should be more easily measured. And it is easier to make exact measurements of the point-like planets than of the large globe of the Sun which is unbearable (and blinding) to look at.

Of the three planets, Mars is the easiest to observe because it is often present in the sky during the whole night, whereas Venus and Mercury are only present in the evening and at dawn. So how do we determine the distance to Mars?

One way to do it is to measure the position of Mars against some nearby star, first from one place on Earth's surface, and then from another place on Earth's surface either at the same time or at a known difference in time. If this is done, Mars's apparent position shifts relative to the star, provided the star is much farther away than Mars is. This is called "parallax."

You can see how parallax works if you hold your finger up and note its position against objects on the wall of the room. View with your left eye only, then your right eye only. The finger shifts position. So do the objects on the wall of the room, but since they are farther away, they shift less, and you are more aware of the finger's shift.

A star is so distant that it doesn't seem to shift at all, and it can be considered the immovable background. However, Mars is also so far away that its parallax is ordinarily too small to be observed.

What do we do, then? For one thing, the greater the change in position from which an object is viewed, the greater the parallax. That means you should view Mars from two places that are thousands of miles apart. But you've got to view it from those two places at known times so that you have to have good clocks that are synchronized, either against each other, or against the time when a certain star crosses the meridian. Even then, the parallax is very small, and you must have a telescope with which to make the measurements.

Everything came together in 1671. By that time, telescopes were much improved over Galileo's first instruments. An adequate method of telling time had come about with the invention, in 1656, of the pendulum clock by the Dutch astronomer Christian Huygens (1629-1695). And, to top it off, two astronomers were thousands of miles apart.

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The Italian-French astronomer Giovanni Domenico Cassini (1625-1712) was in Paris, observing Mars. In Cayenne, French Guiana, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean was a French astronomer, Jean Richer (1630-1696), who was also observing Mars.

The distance between Paris and Cayenne, in a straight line passing through the bulge of spherical Earth could be calculated. From the difference in position of Mars relative to the nearby stars, the distance of Mars could be calculated by Cassini. From the distance of Mars at the time, at that place in its orbit, the distance of the Sun could be calculated.

Cassini did all this and, for the first time in the history of the world, the distance of the Sun was calculated with reasonable accuracy. Cassini actually came out some 7 percent low, but for a first attempt, that was terrific. Let me give you the distance by present standards. Making use of parallax methods under improved circumstances, and other devices that only became practical in the last few decades, we now know quite certainly that the Sun is about 149,600,000 kilometers (92,960,000 miles) from the Earth. This is 19.5 times as great as Aristarchus's figure.

Now we know how near the nearest star is, so we have the answer to our first question.

If the Sun is that much farther away than Aristarchus had thought, it must also be that much larger than Aristarchus had thought, for, whatever its distance, its *apparent* size in the sky doesn't change.

We now know that the diameter of the Sun is 1,392,000 kilometers (865,000 miles). This means it has a diameter that is 109 times that of Earth.

It also means that it has a volume nearly 1,300,000 times that of Earth, so that if the Sun were hollow you could drop it into 1,300,000 bodies of the size of the Earth, provided you ground them all up into dust.

If Aristarchus had been able to make his measurements accurately, then by the time Hipparchus had done his work, the true diameter of the Sun would have been known and it would really have been much easier to suppose the Earth was moving around the Sun.

Except that people might still have argued that no matter how big, how huge, how impossibly colossal the Sun was, it was still simply an object of immaterial light and weighed nothing and therefore it would carry its vast bulk about the Earth.

This is something we must take care of. How can we show that the Sun and the other heavenly bodies

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are *not* immaterial; that they are as heavy and as massive as Earth is, if not even more so?

In short, we must go on to the next question: How much does the Sun weigh? Or, more appropriately: What is its mass?

But I see my space is up. So we'll carry on next month.

BOOKS

By Ålgis Budrys

For those who inked upon Nilotic weeds crushed flat,
And those who skinned the sheep;
For those who pressed their stylii into wax,
The buzzing and the baaing and the soughing of the tassels mark their words.

For those cuneiforming into clay the laws,
The gritty dicta grind;
And monks within their binderies at Nones
Hear tolling and the punching and the squealing of the awls fades off to Echo.

Hoy! Guttenberg! You made books thump!
And now they buzz and whir and roar
Through webs intoxicated with velocity.
One reads your children, Guttenberg,
With great machineries in train; the ears,
you vocifer, have come as much a part of it as eyes,
And such a clatter's in the world that songs
Must be particularly loud.

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This new story is of the same happy genre as Thomas Disch's "The Brave Little Toaster" (F&SF, August 1980), which went on to become a much praised children's book and Disney animated film. Mr. Disch's latest book is YES, LET'S: New and Selected Poems from Johns Hopkins University Press. In July his adaptation of BEN HUR premiered in Baltimore.

The Happy Turnip

By Thomas M. Disch

ONCE ABOUT A time — only a year ago, in fact — in central New Jersey, near the village of Cranbury Station, there lived a young turnip whose name was Pink Wonder. He grew in a field on the Gilbertson family farm along with hundreds and thousands of turnips, all about the same age, weight, and height. Now turnips, as is well known, are sociable vegetables. Rarely do you hear of a turnip being baked, like a potato or an acorn squash, all on its own. At the very least turnips like to mix with other turnips, and more often than not you'll find them in a stew, relating to everyone.

Turnips also tend to be conformists. You may come across carrots and radishes that have sprung additional limbs in odd shapes, and they say that artichokes are like snowflakes, there are no two exactly alike. But any given turnip will seem like every other turnip, until you come to know him very well. With the exception of Pink Wonder. Pink Wonder was a vegetable nonconformist. Not in his outward appearance. Outwardly

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he looked pretty much like any other turnip on the Gilbertson farm. No, what set Pink Wonder apart from other turnips was a tendency to brood and worry and be depressed for no good reason. Pink Wonder was a turnip pessimist.

This character trait, so unusual in a turnip, had become noticeable when Pink Wonder was no more than a sprout newly broken from his seed case. While the other cheery little sprouts about him had been playing the outdoor games that young turnips have played time out of mind, games that can be played without stirring from the place in the field where one has been planted, little Pink Wonder would curl his roothairs into knots and think dark thoughts. Such as, would there be too much rain, or not enough, or even none at all? He was certain that every cloudless day was the beginning of a drought, while the first drop of nourishing rain convinced him the field would be flooded, something that had never happened yet on the Gilbertson farm, for the turnips were planted in good friable soil that soaked up the heaviest rain like a sponge.

Oh, and there were other things that could set him off. Any insect might go buzzing by, and Pink Wonder was certain it was a turnip thrip, hungry for his leaves. Of course, turnips thrips do exist, but they're really quite uncommon on a well-managed farm. Pink Wonder had no more reason to worry about thrips than most people have to worry about being bitten by a rabid dog on their way to the supermarket.

Though none of the things that worried Pink Wonder ever came to pass, that didn't keep him from worrying. And the bigger he grew the more he found to fret about. He shivered whenever a rabbit came by to have a snack of turnip leaves. When big trucks rumbled by on the highway at the far edge of the field and made the earth tremble, Pink Wonder imagined a hungry mole tunneling toward him. Worry, worry, worry — that was Pink Wonder.

Nathan Gilbertson and his wife Emma worked their farm with the help of their three sons, Bill, Bob, and Bud. Bill was 15, Bob was 12, and Bud was 9 (but already taller than his brother Bob). You might suppose that with all the fine turnips they grew on their farm the Gilbertson boys would have had a special appreciation of that particular vegetable. Not so! The three boys were of one mind on the subject of turnips — they did not like them at all. Bud had even said to his brothers that he would rather die than eat

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one spoonful of mashed turnips, but that was surely an exaggeration, for in fact he'd just eaten a much larger portion of turnips than that. His father had made him eat all the mashed turnips left in the serving bowl after he'd tried to feed the turnips on his own dinner plate to the Gilbertson's spaniel, Silky. Silky generally would eat anything she could beg from the dinner table, but she'd just left the turnips on the rug, where Bud's father had found them.

Young Pink Wonder was aware of the way the Gilbertson boys felt about turnips and it made him feel anxious and unhappy. He was certain that when it came time for *him* to appear on someone's dinner table he'd be received the same way — with a loud cry of "Yuk, not turnips again!" Sometimes when he got to thinking along those lines his leaves would wilt with dread. Their uncaring words haunted his dreams: "Turnips make me sick!" "I hate turnips!" and "*Please* don't make me eat those turnips."

You may wonder how a turnip out in a field would know what was happening in someone's house, even a house quite nearby. Actually, vegetables are very alert to what's going on around them, especially root vegetables. From all the time they spend sitting still in their rows and furrows vegetables develop great powers of concentration and attention. They know all the words to all the songs on the radio and what happens every day on all the soap operas. They take a keen interest in politics. They eavesdrop on all the phone conversations whizzing back and forth through the telephone wires strung alongside their fields. Whatever people may be up to, vegetables want to know all about it.

That is because someday they expect to become people themselves. Vegetables believe that when they are eaten and digested by a human being they come to have a share in that person's entire life. This is not unlike the idea some human beings have that when they die they'll come back to life in a little while in some other shape, perhaps as an animal, perhaps as another person. One famous Greek philosopher called Pythagoras even believed that people are re-incarnated — or born again — as beans (not green beans, but the kind of beans that get made into baked beans), and he would not eat beans on that account. Beans have similar beliefs, only in reverse. They want to become Greek philosophers (or some other variety of person), but this can only happen after they've been eaten. And that is why vegetables are so interested in the people around

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them. They're looking forward to the day when they'll be people.

Early one morning in August, Nathan Gilbertson went out into his turnip field, took a grip on the leafy top of one of the larger plants, and yanked it up out of the ground. He brushed off the crumbs of soil that still clung to the turnip's skin and for a while he just admired its beautiful curving body and the delicate pink-tinged white of its complexion. He felt toward that turnip what a painter feels before a new painting, what a violin-maker feels handling a new violin: here was something beautiful and he had helped to create it.

Nathan bit into the young turnip, and smiled, "Yes," he said aloud, so all the turnips in the field could hear him, "they're ready for market."

Hearing what Nathan said, Pink Wonder fairly popped out of his furrow with excitement. It hadn't occurred to him that he might be harvested this early in the year. Was he ready for such a big step? Was he big enough? In another five or six weeks he was sure he could have doubled his present size, or even tripled it.

A gust of wind swept over the field, putting all the leaves of all the turnips into a commotion. "To market!" one turnip marveled to his neighbors. "Imagine — in August!"

THE NEXT day Nathan and his three sons were out in the turnip field at dawn. Each one had an empty bushel basket, and as each of the bushel baskets was filled with the turnips plucked up from the dirt, it was loaded in the back of Nathan's flatbed truck. Pink Wonder was in Bud's row, and as Bud got closer and closer, Pink Wonder got more and more frightened. All his life he'd been looking forward to the day he'd leave the farm and journey to a vegetable stall to meet his destiny, but now that the moment was upon him, he felt panicky. He wasn't ready yet, he told himself; he wasn't big enough, he wasn't ripe.

But all these last-minute second thoughts fell on deaf ears. When Bud came to where Pink Wonder was growing, he wrapped his gloved fingers firmly around the stems of his leaves and gave a single firm tug.

And there he was, with his pink-tinged skin exposed to the raw sunlight, hardly able to believe how *bright* the world was in the sunshine that only his leaves had been aware of until now. For a moment all he could think of was the blueness of the blue sky and then — Pfloop! — Bud tossed

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him into the bushel basket atop a heap of his fellow turnips. And Pfloop! again, as his nearest neighbor in the field was tossed into the basket on top of him.

"This is it, guys!" one of them whispered excitedly. "In a day or two we'll all be steaming in a bowl on someone's dinner table. Whipped till we're light as mushrooms and swimming in butter!"

"Or sliced up into a salad," another turnip suggested, "and flecked with little flakes of ground pepper."

"Or scraped from some finicky four-year-old's plate without ever being tasted," Pink Wonder fantasized gloomily, imagining the worst, imagining the garbage truck that would tow him, all mashed and miserable, and leave him at some city dump along with tons and tons of plastic bottles and squashed cans, never to be tasted, never to be loved, never to have another life.

After being rooted in his furrow for so many months, Pink Wonder could scarcely believe how fast everything happened in the world above ground level. No sooner had the bushel basket been filled to the top than it was crated off and unloaded onto a moving belt on which all the turnips rode through an artificial rainstorm. Then, gleaming with cleanliness, back went the turnips into their baskets and into another larger truck, which was driven by a young woman whose name was written across the back of her raggedy denim coveralls, "Samantha." Under "Samantha," in even bigger letters it said "The Vegetable People." When she'd finished loading the vegetables into the truck, Samantha had a cup of coffee with Mrs. Gilbertson, and then — with three loud toots of the truck's horn to say good-bye to the Gilbertsons — they were off!

"Farewell, old furrows!" Pink Wonder thought. "So long, soil of my birth! I'll never see you again."

Down Country Road "B" they drove for ten miles, then whoosh around a cloverleaf ramp and onto the Garden State Parkway. [New Jersey is called the Garden State in honor of all the vegetables grown there.] Wild weeds and grass flashed by along the side of the highway, which stretched on as as the eye could see or a car could drive both to the north, where they were heading, and to the south from which they'd come. Beyond the grass were fields and farmhouses, and then wide asphalt parking lots and factories, and then signs announcing the exits to Perth Amboy and Linden and Elizabeth.

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Then, just north of Elizabeth, there was a sign that said

STAY IN RIGHT LANE
FOR NEW YORK CITY

Samantha stayed in the right lane. It was only then the vegetables in the truck realized where they were going — to the Big Apple, to New York, New York.

All at once and all together, the turnips in the truck burst into song:

Start spreading the news!
I'm leaving today!
I'm going to be a part of it —
of old New York!

But there was a single turnip who was not singing along with the rest. Pink Wonder, in the midst of all that excitement, could think of nothing but the danger he was in, whizzing along the highway at such an incredible speed. (Incredible to a vegetable anyhow.) At any moment he expected the truck to hurtle out of control and smash into one of the cars careening by in the opposite direction.

"Slower!" he thought at Samantha, "please go slower!"

And though vegetables can sometimes communicate with human beings just by broadcasting their thoughts toward them like radio waves, they only do this when a person's whole attention is focused on some particular vegetable. And right then Samantha's attention was focused on the highway and the traffic around her, as it should be when one is driving. So Samantha didn't receive Pink Wonder's anxious message, and she didn't slow down until the traffic began to clog up as the truck with its bushel baskets of eager turnips approached the entrance to Holland Tunnel, the gateway to New City.

The park in New York City called Union Square is like a giant houseplant in an enormous pot. All of its trees, some of which are quite old, as well as its flowerbeds and its trampled lawns, are located on top of one of the city's biggest subway stations, which is also called Union Square. The roots of the trees must come to a stop when they reach the subway's ceiling of steel and concrete, like the roots of a houseplant when it reaches the limits set by its pot. But the trees of Union Square didn't mind that, because they were urban trees, and what their roots lacked in terms

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of depth of soil, their leaves and branches made up for in the excitement of living in the hustling, bustling center of the city.

On Wednesdays and Fridays and Saturdays Union Square was at its most hustling and bustling, because on those days the Green Market came to the north end of Union Square. At the Green Market farmers from miles around sold the fruits and vegetables and cheeses they'd brought to town from their own nearby farms and dairies.

And this was where Samantha had taken Pink Wonder and his fellow turnips from the Gilbertson farm. It was almost too good to be true. To a vegetable Union Square meant what Broadway meant to an actor. It was the ultimate goal, the promised land, the highest destiny to which any turnip could aspire. For one brief shining moment, as he was laid out on the wooden trestle of the Vegetable People's stall, even Pink Wonder forgot to be concerned about whatever might go wrong and just enjoyed his moment of glory here and now.

"Union Square!" he marveled. "Me! Oh my! Oh, happy day!"

There were not only turnips for sale at the Vegetable People's stall. There were also tomatoes — a small mountain of ripe, red, August tomatoes that Samantha and two other Vegetable People were constantly replenishing from the back of a second truck. August is absolutely the best time to buy tomatoes, and almost everyone who'd come to shop at the Green Market had a bag of tomatoes, which were going for 75¢ a pound, or three pounds for $2.00. At a regular grocery store tomatoes would have cost even more, and they wouldn't have been nearly as good, or as fresh, and that was true of all the other vegetables at the Green Market, and the reason why people from all over the city came to Union Square to get their vegetables.

After tomatoes, sweet corn was probably the most popular vegetable at the Green Market that day, and after sweet corn it would have been a toss-up between zucchini and string beans. To the dismay of all the turnips they turned out to be less in demand than almost any other vegetable except for real oddballs, the kind, like salsify or kohlrabi, that when you see them you have to ask, "What's that?"

Sad to say, for some shoppers the turnips were in the what's-that category. One young man wearing a "Let's Go Mets!" teeshirt picked up Pink Wonder by the tips of his leaves and asked Samantha, "What kind of radish is this?" When Samantha said he wasn't any kind of radish, but

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a Pink Wonder turnip, the Mets fan wrinkled his nose in disgust and dropped him on top of the other turnips like a hot potato.

Pink Wonder felt terrible. Why were people so prejudiced against turnips? Without ever having tasted them, just at the mention of their name, turnip. All the excitement of being for sale at the Green Market curdled to gloom, and Pink Wonder wished he were back at the Gilbertson farm, snug and warm in his bed of rich, crumbly soil. He began to imagine the worst. He wouldn't be sold, and the Vegetable People would toss him and his fellow turnips onto the big heap of spoiled fruit and vegetables that would be gobbled up by the garbage truck that came to clean up at the end of the day. And then? An incinerator, very likely.

If turnips had eyes as potatoes do and could cry, Pink Wonder would have cried his eyes out. But turnips don't cry. Poor Pink Wonder could only lie there on the trestle and worry himself sick.

"So, you're a turnip," said a small, not completely ripe tomato who had been lying alongside Pink Wonder for some time. "Imagine that! I've heard tell of turnips, but I've never actually come across one. Of course there are lots of vegetables I know only by reputation. Carrots, onions, almost any root or tuber. We tomatoes, up on our vines, can take a wider view than many vegetables, but even so we have our limits. No slight intended, as to what I said about tubers."

"Oh, that's okay," said Pink Wonder. "I've never met a tomato before, if it comes to that. Though naturally I've heard a lot about you. All nice things, you can be sure."

"Such as?" the tomato wanted to know.

"What I've heard," said Pink Wonder, respectfully, "is that tomatoes can team up with just about any vegetable there is. With eggplant. With okra. I guess that's why tomatoes are so popular."

"That's very kind of you. I've heard nice things about turnips, too — although right at the moment I can't remember what. I'm so wrought up, I can only think of one thing: who's going to pick me up and take me home and what will happen then? There are so many people here, and most of them, I'm sure, are Grade A, but others may turn out to be, excuse the expression, rotters. But how can you tell in just the little time that someone is picking you up and wondering if you're for them? How can you tell just from the touch of someone's fingers if you and that person are the right combination? What if you made them sick?"

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"Oh, *you* wouldn't do that. As fresh as you are."

"You never can tell," said the tomato darkly. "And even if you're digested with no problem at all, what then? You're going to become the person who ate you, whoever that person turns out to be. They might be the wrong sort altogether. That girl, for instance, who's been picking up tomatoes at the other table and looking at them so intently and putting them back. Is she the sort of person *I* should become?"

"Her fingernails are almost the same red as you are," Pink Wonder pointed out.

"Yes, that was the first thing I noticed, too. But is a person's shade of red as important for people as it is for tomatoes? Probably not, if we're only talking about fingernails. Oh, she's coming over here! What should I do? Should I send out a signal to her? Should I ask *her* to buy me? Or should I wait for someone else? There are tomatoes here bigger and riper than me. Who knows if anyone at all will want to buy me? I might end up in the garbage?"

"Oh no," said Pink Wonder reassuringly. "I can't see that happening to you. I think *she'll* buy you, if you just concentrate."

"Concentrate," said the tomato. "Right!" She began to send out signals to the woman with the red fingernails: *Buy me!* she beamed at her. *I am precisely the right tomato for you. Put me in a stew, or slice me up for a BLT. I'm just the right size for you, and I'm not so ripe that I'll leak juice out when you bite into me. Buy me! Please!*

Pink Wonder, wanting to help his new friend, beamed his own brief ad on behalf of the tomato: *Hey take a look at that tomato! Doesn't she make your mouth water!*

The woman stopped in front of their table. Her right hand hovered over the tomato. The red fingernails wavered indecisively. Then, to the amazement of Pink Wonder (and the chagrin of the little tomato), her hand darted down and the fingers closed around Pink Wonder's stalk.

"What beautiful turnips!" she said aloud. "I must make tbika tonight!"

Tbika?

All the way home to the apartment of the woman who'd bought him, inside her shopping bag, as he was tumbled about among the other vegetables she'd bought, the onions, tomatoes (his new friend among them), spinach, and fresh parsley, Pink Wonder kept

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wondering what tbika could be. None of the other vegetables had any more information on the subject than he did, and they were all feeling the vegetable equivalent of nerves, like a rookie quarterback who's spent the whole season on the bench but now it's the Superbowl and he has to step into the huddle on the 50-yard line with only two minutes left to play and his team down by two points.

"Do you think we'll be fried? Or boiled? Or steamed?" Pink Wonder worried aloud. "Tbika: what in the world can it be?"

"I don't know," the tomato replied, "and I don't really care, as long as there's a place in it for a tomato or two. Did you see the way she *smiled* when she picked me up? And her gentleness when she put me in this little plastic bag with my old buddies? I think she's wonderful, just wonderful!"

"Yes, of course, she's wonderful." Pink Wonder replied abstractedly, "But what's tbika?"

The name of the woman with the tomato-red fingernails who was taking the vegetables home with her was Jessica Cork. She worked as an X-ray technician at Beth Israel Medical Center, which was only a hop, skip and jump from the Union Square Green Market. From the Green Market to her apartment in Stuyvesant Town was the same hop, skip and jump in reverse and then another five minutes. She shared the apartment with her sister Janet Daley, who was a Certified Public Accountant, and with Janet's son Gabe, who was ten years old and in fourth grade at the same grade school Jessica and Janet had gone to, years before, the Friends' School on East 16th.

There was one other person living in the apartment, but only temporarily. Old Mr. Cork, Jessica's and Janet's father, had come for a two-week visit from his home in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where he'd gone to live when he'd retired five years ago from his job at the Post Office. In Florida he snorkeled, and painted watercolors of the ocean and beaches and palm trees. There were watercolors painted by Old Mr. Cork all over the apartment. The bathroom alone had five. There really wasn't any space left on the walls, but that didn't stop Mr. Cork. He was at work on another watercolor, sitting at the kitchen table where a teapot, four apples and a single banana were posing for him.

"Hello, Pops," Jessica said, setting the bag of vegetables on the kitchen counter. "Pops" was what everyone in the family called Old Mr. Cork.

"No phone calls," he said without looking away from the moist tip of

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his brush as he daubed it into the square of burnt sienna in his watercolor box, then, gingerly, into the square of cadmium red. (He was painting the bottom, shadowy part of the teapot.)

Jessica began to take the vegetables from the shopping bag and laid them on the counter. Pink Wonder, at the bottom of the bag, was the last to come out.

What a beautiful kitchen! he thought.

"What a beautiful turnip," said Old Mr. Cork, picking Pink Wonder up by his stalk.

"That's just what I thought when I saw it at the Green Market," Jessica agreed.

"That pink," said the old man, "is just what I need in this still-life. You can almost hear it go *Ping!*"

He picked up Pink Wonder from the counter and put him down on the table between the banana and the teapot.

"But, Pops," Jessica objected, "that turnip's supposed to be part of our dinner."

"Oh, come on, Jessie," the old man wheedled. "One turnip more or less can't make any difference."

But it can! Pink Wonder thought desperately. It can make all the difference in the world when that one turnip is you.

But all his protests were in vain. Old Mr. Cork's attention was focused on his painting, and Jessica was thumbing through all her cookbooks looking for her recipe for tbika. When people's thoughts are focused on their own intents and purposes, they become deaf to the signals from the vegetables around them.

"You think you've got problems," lamented the banana to Pink Wonder, as they posed for Old Mr. Cork's still-life. "You're still fresh and tender. Look at me. I'm turning black and going soft inside. Soon enough I'll start to smell, and then it'll be the garbage pail for me. The chute! The incinerator!"

The banana was not exaggerating. He was not a pretty sight.

One of the apples tried to be reassuring. "You mustn't worry. Remember what Janet said: she's going to make banana bread. And you've got to be very ripe for that."

"With *one* banana she's going to make banana bread?"

The apple had no cheery answer to that. Only two days ago there had

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been two other bananas ripening alongside this one, but then Old Mr. Cork had sliced one up over his corn flakes at breakfast, and Gabe had eaten the other when he'd come home from school. Now there was only this one banana left, who was good for nothing but making banana bread. Or else — the garbage pail.

If it could happen to a banana, it could happen to a turnip. Pink Wonder felt desperate. To be so close to success — and then to fail! He could hear the steady chunk, chunk, chunk of the knife on the chopping block as Jessica chopped the lucky onions who were to begin making the tbika. How he wished he was with the other turnips on the counter, all in a hush of anticipation, like children hiding on a stairway, on the night before Christmas, waiting to catch a glimpse of Santa and to see what he'd put in their stockings. But wishing is the same for turnips as for anyone else: it doesn't accomplish a thing.

Unless, sometimes, if you wish very, very hard, then, on the average of one wish in seven, wishes do work. Fortunately for Pink Wonder, his wish was one of the one-in-seven that pays off. For at just that moment, a friendly onion, sensing Pink Wonder's predicament, shot out from Jessica's fingers as she was about to begin chopping it up. The onion, freshly skinned and slippery, hurtled with billiard ball accuracy straight toward the glass of water Old Mr. Cork was using to rinse his brush. The onion hit the rim of the glass, the glass tipped over, and the muddy water flowed across the half-finished still-life.

Old Mr. Cork was too astonished to be angry, and in any case the damage was done. The dirty water had made great gray splotches all over his picture. There was no undoing the damage, and he didn't have the energy to start over from scratch. Mr. Cork just sighed, and gathered up his painting things, put the black banana back on the saucer on top of the refrigerator — and returned Pink Wonder, safe and sound, to the embrace of his fellow turnips.

The turnips sent up a silent cheer of welcome, and at the same instant the skillet on the gas burner emitted a thrilling sizzle as Jessica emptied a cupful of chopped onions into the hot olive oil. The tbika was underway!

Even for the bravest person the first moment in a dentist's chair takes an act of courage, the moment you have to open your mouth to let him start to work with his drill. Even though you know you'll be better off in

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the long run as a result of the dentist's work, the thought of that drill can be troubling.

And so it was for Pink Wonder as Jessica laid him down on the butcher board chopping block and prepared to remove his stalk and quarter him. There is no way he could become a part of the tbika without taking these essential steps, but even so. . . .

Then, before he knew what had happened, with three lightning-quick flicks of the paring knife, the work was done. Pink Wonder was now four separate entities with a single, astonished consciousness. Jessica's gentle hand gathered up the four parts of him and held him suspended for a moment above his destiny.

Confident as an Olympic diving contestant at the peak of his form, Pink Wonder plunged into the sizzling skillet.

The feeling of hitting hot olive oil, for a vegetable, is similar to what a person feels stepping out of doors on a bright, cold December morning. A zing of pure pleasure, as the happy turnip takes in at every pore the concentrated meaning of the lives of all the olives that yielded the oil. A Spanish hillside, the blazing sun, the gnarled limbs of the olive trees, the first blossoms, the swelling fruit — and then the harvest festival. Guitars and the clattering heels of flamenco dancers. Ole!

But there were also onions cooking in that oil, and the four pieces of Pink Wonder soaked up memories of the quieter, down-home life those onions had lived on a farm in Pennsylvania. To anyone who is not a root vegetable, an onion's life is apt to seem not very different from a turnip's, but to Pink Wonder, he and the onions were poles apart, and every fact they had to tell about life in Pennsylvania was fascinating. The soil they'd grown in, and various worms and bugs they'd known as they were growing up. Morning mists and major rainstorms. The farmer who'd planted them, and the farmer's dog, and her puppies, and a tribe of deer who sometimes visited the onion field. And much else besides. The onions were very forthcoming, not to say chatterboxes.

Pink Wonder on the other hand was a sponge, a listener, and in this he was a typical turnip. Julia Child, the famous cook, has this to say about turnips: "The turnip is a wonderful vegetable when given the treatment required to bring out its delicious qualities." She explains that turnips become particularly succulent when they can absorb the fat they're being cooked in, or when they're simmered in a stew and have time to strike

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up an acquaintance with their fellow ingredients.

With, in Pink Wonder's case, the Pennsylvania onion, and with the friendly tomato he'd talked to at the Vegetable People's stall, and with two other tomatoes from the same farm in upstate New York. With tiny flecks of peppercorn from halfway round the world in Malabar, India (they liked to brag about the time they'd ridden on an elephant, a story the tomatoes refused to believe), and with the juice of a lemon who knew all kinds of jokes and told them in a twangy Texas accent that made them seem twice as funny.

There was also some spinach from Connecticut, but that was the last vegetable to go into the tbika. As soon as its leaves had wilted Jessica took the skillet off the flame and called out, "Dinner's ready!" So Pink Wonder never had much time to make the spinach's acquaintance. But that is something that will happen at any party where there are more than a handful of guests. There are some you may only have time to say hello to.

JANET HAD set the table for the dinner, and it was as beautiful as any table setting you might see on the cover of *Family Circle* or *Gourmet* magazine. Jessica sat at one end of the table, and Janet sat at the other, with Old Mr. Cork on her right hand and young Gabe on her left.

Gabe squinted at the tbika on his plate. "What is this?" he asked with grave suspicion.

"It's tbika," said Jessica.

"And it's delicious," said Janet to her sister, after a first forkful.

"Is that *all* we're having?" Gabe asked with a look of alarm.

Janet passed her son the basket of rolls. "There's these."

"And there's plenty more of the tbika in the pan, if you want second helpings," said Jessica.

Gabe groaned.

"You know, it's really not that bad," Mr. Cork declared. "Not bad at all."

At that moment Jessica speared Pink Wonder with the tines of her fork and lifted him up to her lips. The lips parted and he rode the fork through the ivory gates of her teeth and came to rest upon the soft cushion of her tongue. He watched with fascination as the ivory gates rose and fell, rose and fell, and then — as the tongue nudged him onto a back molar — came down on him.

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Only a vegetable can understand the happiness of that moment, and of those that were to follow, as, mingled into a single delicious paste with the tomatoes and onions and spinach and olive oil and spices, Pink Wonder lingered a moment on Jessica's delighted taste buds and then slid down the long slippery tunnel of her esophagus to come to rest in her stomach.

Stomachs are dark places, but root vegetables, who've spent most of their lives underground, are quite at home in the dark. The process of digestion (which is what goes on inside the stomach) is hard to describe to those who haven't been through it. It's a little like being in a waterbed, because the stomach keeps a kind of churning motion going, and a little like falling asleep when you're very tired and can't think of anything more wonderful than fading away into a dream.

For a while Pink Wonder was confused. He thought he was back on the Gilbertson farm, newly planted, a mere seedling knowing little more than the difference between up and down, wet and dry, hot and cold. This was because the gastric juices in Jessica's stomach were splitting each little bit of him into tinier and tinier pieces. The smaller the pieces of him, the simpler were his thoughts, until, as he passed from the stomach into the duodenum, he had only a single tingle of a thought left: *Oh, this feels good. I'm so happy.*

Then even this dim idea faded away, as Pink Wonder, fully digested and simplified to a few basic proteins and carbohydrates, began to become part and parcel of Jessica Cork, slipping into her blood stream, and traveling everywhere through her body.

"Do I *have* to?" Gabe whined.

"Yes," his mother said, "you have to."

"I'll be sick," he warned.

"I doubt that. We all ate ours, and none of us were sick."

"But it's cold now."

"Tbika is often served cold," Jessica called in cheerfully from the kitchen, where she was starting to make banana bread. "With lemon juice."

"Maybe you'd like some lemon juice?" Janet asked.

"Ha, ha, very funny."

"Just close your eyes and shovel it in," advised Old Mr. Cork from the

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far side of the room, where he'd set up a card table and a game of Monopoly.

Gabe took a deep breath. He scooped up the last remaining quarter of Pink Wonder onto his fork. Each of the other three parts of him had been served up on a different dinner plate, and so he was now in the digestive tract of each member of the family. Except Gabe's.

Pink Wonder beamed a message of friendship at Gabe, who still hesitated. *Hey, come on, give me a chance. Turnips are nice.*

Gabe closed his eyes. He lifted the fork to his lips and paused dramatically, like a prisoner waiting for a last-minute stay of execution. But there was to be no reprieve. He opened his mouth. Pink Wonder entered. He was chewed. He was swallowed. Gabe opened his eyes.

"Now was that so bad?" his mother asked.

Gabe, as a point of pride, had been planning to insist that he hated turnips. But really they were kind of nice! He wouldn't come right out and say so, but he did eat what was left on his plate without more grumbling.

Old Mr. Cork woke up in the middle of the night, as he almost always did when he was visiting his daughters in New York, and even sometimes

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when he was home in Florida. He looked at the glowing numbers of the digital clock that was built into the VCR on the other side of the room. (He was sleeping on the living room sofa, which folded out into a bed.) The clock said 2:53. He knew that on nights like this it would be another couple of hours before he'd be able to get back to sleep, so he got up and put on his bathrobe and went out on the little concrete ledge his daughters called The Balcony.

The Balcony looked out beyond the other high-rise apartments of Stuyvesant Town toward the East River. Moonlight glinted off the water, and the double-brightnesses of headlights swept along FDR Drive, one after another. So many cars, even at this hour. To think there were people still heading home at almost 3 A.M. Though some of the headlights weren't heading home. Some of them were trucks bringing things to stores and markets. Meat, fish, vegetables.

Such an enormous city! It never ceased to amaze Old Mr. Cork just how big the city was. And the world for that matter. Three weeks ago he'd been snorkeling in the Gulf waters on the western coast of Florida, and now here he was in what seemed almost another universe. Such a beautiful night. The moon on the water. . . .

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Then he remembered the strange dream he'd been dreaming just before he woke up. He'd dreamed he was a turnip, of all things, but wearing the red Adidas swimming trunks he'd bought when he first moved to Florida. And his snorkeling mask, though now that he thought about it, why would a turnip need snorkeling gear? But in dreams we're not always so logical. In dreams turnips breathe.

He had been swimming (in his dream) around the most beautiful reef of pink coral that he'd ever seen (so it couldn't have been in Tampa, where he'd actually gone snorkeling, for there was no such reef there), and hundreds of astonishing fish were flitting by him to the left and the right, above and below.

And then, out of nowhere, Jessica appeared on his right hand (though turnips, of course, don't have hands) and Janet with young Gabe beside her on his left, and the three of them were turnips, too!

Mr. Cork felt an incredible sense of happiness and well-being, and he knew that his daughters and grandson shared it. Such a feeling! As though the four of them were a single turnip, whose name was (he didn't know how he knew this, but he was as sure of it as he was of the housekey in the pocket of his pants). . . .

Whose name was . . . Pink Wonder?

Then, the way dreams do, it faded. When he went back to bed the digital clock said it was 3:46. And all he remembered of the entire dream, when he woke up the next morning, was just the name, Pink Wonder.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 48

In the May issue we asked for last lines from an sf, horror or fantasy movie. We were looking for lines of dialogue, not story endings, but we tried to be flexible.

Reminder; suggestions for new competitions are always most welcome and will be rewarded

FIRST PRIZE

"Brace yourself boys. I have some bad news. I'm afraid they've ruled against us. We're going to have to try and live . . . on the surface."

"Negative mobile base, not foothill. I said we have landed in a foot-pri——"

"And so for an instant, we will be the brightest star in the universe."

Larry Zajac
Ann Arbor, MI

SECOND PRIZE

"The solar storms bathed the Earth for only a few days and have apparently rendered all men impotent. Your ship was well shielded within Jupiter's magnetosphere. Welcome home Colonel."

"No need to worry my friend. This is a new planet. Our dinosaurs will be just fine. If it will make you feel better, we'll come back in a couple of knions and check on them."

Steven Thomson
Mississauga, Ont.

RUNNERS UP

"Tarzan live. Bad men die in quicksand. Tell High Priestess that golden tooth now returned to mouth of idol. Secret of Great God Bazuzzu safe. Tarzan return to treehouse with Jane and Boy."

"Let the fate of Dr. Schrecken serve as a warning against all those who would pervert the laws of God to their own mad visions of power. Yet even from his sins, monstrous as they were, will some good follow. Little could he have foreseen that the same formula used by him to enslave other minds might some day free the mind of Man from its own animal instincts."

Mark Ditoro
Coraopolis, PA

"Past experience may lead you to believe that this is the end of me . . . yet I, the notorious Dr. Zottsoff, need only press this tiny switch and we will be sent four seconds into the past experience may lead you to believe that this is the end of me . . . yet, I the notorious Dr. Zottsoff, need only press this tiny switch and we will be sent four seconds into the past experience may lead you to believe . . ."

"And what of Count Zordney, who vowed to scratch his way out of the grave and deal with us all? Well, we buried him face down. Scratch away, Zordney!"

Joel Goodman
Stanwood, IA

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HONORABLE MENTIONS

"One day men will thank you. Through the centuries, our world's greatest thinkers have been mocked and ignored. But soon your persistent courage will be recognized... and flubber will take its rightful place in history."

"Dave? Dave? Talk to me Dave. I don't want you to be dead, Dave. Dave? I'm sorry Dave. I'm sorry I never heard of Asimov, Dave. Dave?"

Todd Cassel
Cedar Knolls, NJ

"An interesting game John, most interesting. But I'm tired and must sleep. Do me a favor and turn out the stars as you leave."

Syd Bear
Amherst, MA

COMPETITION 49 (suggested by Timothy Bartel)

Submit any number of "Science Fiction Graffiti," which are defined for this comp as 4 line poems with end-rhymes *aabb*, each making a witty remark about a science fiction author or character.

For example:

Harlan Ellison's
Perpetual orison
is: "God please be good,
Nuke Hollywood"

H.P. Lovecraft
Was daft,
But who else among us
Can create such convincing fungus?

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by October 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 49 will appear in the Feb. Issue.

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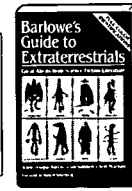

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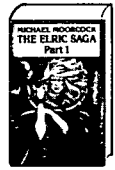

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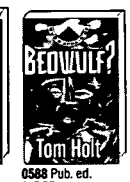

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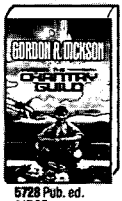

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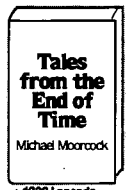

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